

Oculus

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Oculus

by Anonymous

Summary

Tweek has been haunted by the grotesque form of his missing best friend since childhood. Perplexed by his vivid visions and growing bond with the mangled little ghost boy, he has searched for years to find the answer to one question: Who murdered Craig Tucker?

This was written by Eerily in 2014 and was since deleted from Fanfiction.net and AO3. It is a really well written fanfiction and I feel that the people who weren't in the fandom before it was taken down should still be able to read it. I don't claim ownership of this story at all. When this was written, Tricia (Craig's sister) and Helen (Tweek's mother) didn't have canon names so they were originally called Ruby and Cindy in turn. I changed their names to the now canon ones, but that is the only change I made to the story.

Prologue

Chapter Notes

If you want to read this, I suggest downloading it because I don't know how long it will be up.

"Okay," Craig muttered.

He laid back in Tweek's bed and got comfortable. However, the little blond shuddering beside him was too uneasy with his bedroom to pay attention to his friend.

"What is it you needed me here for?" Craig asked. Tweek said it was urgent. There was something odd about his new house, though he wouldn't say what.

Tweek's eyes shifted to the ceiling before he replied in a whisper, "There's a man who lives in the attic."

"A man?" Craig asked with squinted eyes. It was hard to see Tweek in the dim light of the room. "Yeah. A ghost, I think! At least I hope," Tweek scraped at his scalp with his fingernails. "Oh, god. A ghost would be so less scary than an actual man! I want you to see him too, so my mom will believe me! S-she never believes me."

Craig wasn't alarmed. So many odd things came out of Tweek's mouth over the years. Ghosts seemed tame in comparison to most of his conspiracy theories.

Tweek could sense his friend's disbelief. He grabbed him by the front of his pajama shirt and whispered urgently, "I-it's true! If I lay in bed and listen really quiet, I can hear the ceiling creak under his feet."

They laid in silence as if the eerie groaning of hardwood would fill the space between them. However, much to both of their relief, the sound never comes.

"Ghosts aren't real, you know," Craig said as if he wasn't leery himself.

"They are too!" Tweek persisted. "I've seen lots of them! And this one; he stands by my bed and talks to me while I try to sleep."

"... Maybe you just dreamed it. Sometimes it's hard to tell them apart. Reality and dreams, I mean," Craig clarified.

Tweek was silent for a short while as he contemplated his friend's point. Maybe they were only nightmares or even figments of his imagination. It wouldn't have been the first time he believed in something that wasn't true, but the man was so real. He could still recall the first night he heard knocking at the attic door.

Craig frowned, though Tweek couldn't see it. He leaned forward and slipped an arm around his frightened friend to nestle close.

"It's okay," Craig assured him, "tonight we'll figure this out."

Tweek didn't say anything back. He just laid there with his forehead pressing into Craig's collarbone. He was trying to be brave, but he wasn't so strong at only eleven years old. As time crept on, though, he let himself slip into a sense of comfort. All talk of ghosts and spirits left their minds as conversation veered towards school and the people they knew there.

"You like Wendy and you know it," Tweek teased.

"Psh, she's such a know-it-all, though."

"Craig and Wendy sitting in a tree!"

"Don't you even say that stupid rhyme to me, I swear to God."

"K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

Craig playfully clamped his hand on Tweek's mouth. Much to Craig's displeasure, Tweek knew how to get out of it without so much as lifting a finger.

"Ew!" Craig shouted before wiping his hand on Tweek's arm. "You didn't have to go and lick me, you little weirdo."

Tweek giggled and held his stomach as he laughed. That laughter stopped when a noise interrupted their coziness. It was fuzzy and loud like static. It was alarming.

Ominous.

Craig pulled the covers down to his chin and peered at the television across the room. The screen flickered with snow, and the room flashed with its eerie light. Tweek yanked his covers back up over his head. Craig, however, wasn't spooked so easy. Televisions lose reception all the time. They go fuzzy. They turn on and off. They make noise. That's just what happens, and just because it happened in the dark didn't make it any less routine to the braver of the two.

Then again, he didn't know what was coming.

"Oh, come on, Tweek. It's not that scary," Craig said before getting out of bed.

He walked across the room and pushed the power button. The screen went black. All the humming seized.

"See?" Craig announced in triumph.

Tweek peeked back out from under his haven of stuffed animals and blankets. With a small smile, Craig made his way to the bed. He didn't make it back before being startled rigid. The familiar ring of static hummed from behind him.

The television yet again flicked back to life.

Craig saw the remote undisturbed on a nearby dresser. Still, he wasn't scared. Not like Tweek, who was rattled down to his bones. Craig stomped back to the television and ripped its power cord out of the wall. Tweek settled a little, and Craig sighed in contentment when he made it back to bed with no more odd occurrences.

"See," Craig announced. "Your TV is just busted. Wires are probably loose or something, you know."

Then, cold shivers scraped up both of their spines. Their blood ran cold, breath caught in their

throats, and their stomachs tied up in knots.

The television was on.

Craig shot up straight and stiff. He couldn't believe what he saw. There it was, clear as day. The white glow still filled the room. The screen still flickered in scrambling white and black specks.

The cord was still lay unplugged on the floor.

Craig could only stare in bewildered fear and fascination. An odd knocking accompanied the screen's disturbing glow. Craig's eyes shifted to the ceiling, where a door to the attic was nestled above the television. The consistent thumping came from nowhere else. That in itself made Craig's skin crawl. Tweek threw his arms around Craig and dragged him back into bed.

"Just ignore it," Tweek whispered with a stutter. "Ignore it and be quiet. It'll leave us alone." Craig, paralyzed in fear, decided to take Tweek's advice.

They lay huddled close together. They both tried to steady their breath and keep quiet despite all the noise. It sounded like a single chair dragging across a hardwood floor. Its non-existent legs scraped against a surface that simply wasn't there. In that house, there was only carpet.

The static still blared. Knocking still came from the attic door. It grew ever more violent with each bang. Both of their breaths caught in their throats when a crash resonated throughout the room. All the other noise stopped. All except heavy footsteps that creaked the floorboards.

"Tweek," Craig choked out in terror. The steps were coming closer. They came from across the room, from the corner which harbored the attic.

Tweek clamped his hand over his horrified friend's mouth. If they made so much as a single noise, it would know they were there. The floor groaned louder as the shuffling moved closer to the bed.

It stopped at their feet.

Something tugged the fabric at their feet, and then slowly pulled it away from them. Their small hands shot up and grabbed the blanket. They tried to fight the specter behind the footboard, but they were no match for its strength. Craig let out a scream of the likes Tweek had never heard when the comforter jerked away from them. The fabric collided with the wall, and then it fell to the floor in a heap.

Confused and with no other direction, they both stared at the blaring television. The picture flickered and swayed with fuzz. The cord still lay unplugged nearby. Craig wanted to scream bloody murder for Tweek's mother to come save them. He could feel someone else in the room as they watched from somewhere in the shadows. What was worse, though, was noticing the attic door gaped open. Their breath was heavy between them. Craig's fingers curled around Tweek's arm like a vise when they both noticed the dark mass lingering beside the television. It was darker than dark. As if it absorbed the blackness around it.

Craig let out a strangled whimper of horror. He was too afraid to even scream anymore. Tweek looked at his friend with a similar expression. He could practically see the color dripping off of Craig's once self-assured face. He was paper white, and his mouth gaped open. The boy's wide eyes trained on the entity invading their space.

On the ghost.

Tweek grew angry.

Usually, Craig was the all-knowing protector. He'd never encountered something like this. He wasn't haunted every night for the last two weeks like Tweek had been, and he wasn't used to coming face to face with such horrors. Craig was afraid, and the black creature looming in the corner was to blame. Tweek glared into its eyes. They were crimson and glowing like that of a demon. Two orbs that floated together in a black puddle on the wall.

It had never been so violent and angry before, but neither had Tweek.

"Go away!" He demanded. Craig's stronghold only tightened when he wrapped himself around Tweek's right arm. Tweek could hear his friend's fear in the rapid breath in his ear.

The malicious force would not recede.

"What do you want with me?!"

The temperature plummeted. It looked back into Tweek's eyes. Those red orbs felt like a scorching fire that bored holes into his skull. Craig's gasping breaths stopped.

He saw the attic. It flashed inside Tweek's eyes like an old film.

He recognized the bare, vaulted ceiling made of two by fours and open insulation. It was dark, though illuminated like it was caught in the beam of a flashlight. There was no sound or movement. There was one exception.

A single rope hung from a rafter.

It swung back and forth.

Back and forth.

Tweek's vision flicked like the pattern on the television. It melded in and out as the pictures switched from the creature's invasive eyes to the swinging rope.

A child's happy face.

A woman with kind eyes.

The noose.

A man smiling in a living room he recognized.

The man was wearing the same unsettling grin as he swung. As the noose in the attic caught his fall and his wide, bulging eyes remained locked with Tweek's. The toothy grin didn't subside. His eyes didn't break away from Tweek's, even as he was strangling to death.

Convulsing.

Swinging rhythmically.

Craig didn't see the happy people, the rope, or the eerily wide grin of the man hanging from it. All he saw was Tweek himself, laying back on the bed with wide eyes and mouth hanging open like a hatch to a cellar.

In tears, Craig shook Tweek. He shook him until their tormentor faded back into the shadows. He shook him and cried until the television flicked off and the bedroom door busted open. Tweek's mother rushed inside, and Tweek blinked.

"What's wrong? What's with all the screaming?" She demanded in a panic.

She saw Tweek on his back and Craig cradling him in tears. Horrified, she bolted for the bed and got down beside him.

"Tweek? Baby, what's wrong?"

"He strung himself up."

She and Craig both exchanged looks of confusion, though Craig's chest was heaving and his eyes were wide with fear.

"What?" she asked in a worried tone.

"He put a rope around his neck. He hung from it in the attic."

"That's ridiculous! Who told you such terrible stories?!" Tweek still struggled to catch his breath. The image of that disturbing grin lingered in his eyes like a bad taste. That ever unsettling, toothy, grin.

It would never fade away.

"No one," Tweek confessed as tears spilled down his cheeks. "He showed me in my eyes."

"He showed me in my eyes."

Shadowman

"Tweek, darling," his mother said solemnly. "We need to have a little talk if that's okay."

Rain pounded against the glass. It set odd patterns across the living room walls and Tweek's unflinching face. He sat on the seat of the bay window and peered out at the street. He didn't seem to hear her. He just sat and stared out that window.

Sat and waited.

She came towards him. Her hands smoothed out her nightgown as she took a seat on the same cushion. "It's about your little friend."

The gloomy boy perked with interest.

"D-did they find him?" Tweek asked without hesitation. "Did they find where Craig is?"

Her lips pursed together, and then she, too, directed her gaze to the storm outside.

"It's been a week now, honey. They still haven't found anything. I'm so sorry, but I'm not sure they will."

"What do you mean? Of course, they will!" Tweek declared. "They have to!"

She forced a smile on her face and then ran her fingers through her short brown bob.

"Yes. Yes, of course. But don't you think Craig would be sad if he saw you sitting here alone all the time?"

Thunder rolled in the distance and lightning cracked across the sky. In that moment the dark street flashed white. He saw someone. It was only a faint silhouette in the midst of the wind and rain, but it was there.

Crawling.

He swallowed hard and wiped his eyes.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Well, how about this. Let's go to bed and leave the window alone for tonight, then I'll make you a big breakfast in the morning. How does that sound?"

Tweek kept his eyes on the road where he'd seen the silhouette, but he didn't see it again. "Okay," he agreed.

She stood, and then he reluctantly stood with her.

He didn't want to go to his room. David, the man in the attic, still liked to come down at night. It had been a year since he tormented Craig and Tweek during their sleepover, but he never stopped trying to talk to Tweek.

He was afraid he might find himself listening.

His sock covered feet scuffed against tan carpet as his mother led him up the stairs and into that

very room. She didn't seem to feel the shift in the air like he did. No one seemed to, though. Without any fuss, he slipped underneath his comforter.

One of his pillows still smelled like Craig. His bottom lip quivered when he caught a faint whiff of it.

He could remember his friend's face so vividly. Craig's voice almost seemed to whisper through the sheets as if he was drifting to sleep. The room sometimes still felt like it did when he was there, but he wasn't. He didn't understand why he was gone.

Tweek wanted him back.

Tears pooled in the small boy's blue eyes. He tried not to let them spill over while his mom was with him. He was twelve, after all. He wasn't a baby anymore.

Though he tried hard, his pillow became wet.

Craig.

He couldn't stop the sorrowful chokes and whines bubbling up from his throat. He couldn't survive without his best friend. His body went limp when his mother scooted closer and pulled him into her arms. For an empty few moments, she listened to her only child cry.

What else could she have done? There wasn't a lie she could say that would calm her son's fear. There wasn't a promise she could make that would change anything. Craig was gone for some time now, and the longer he was away the less likely it was he'd ever come back. Still, she held Tweek. She squeezed him in her arms and pressed a lingering kiss to his hair. Not every mother was lucky enough to kiss her son goodnight. She would never take it for granted again.

"Would you feel better if I slept here tonight?" she offered under his cries.

Much to her relief, Tweek nodded. The two settled into the warmth of the small bed. It brought little comfort for either of them, though it made Tweek feel better knowing he wasn't alone.

As the night crept onward, the little boy did not sleep. His mother's chest rose and fell in relaxed rhythm. He listened close to her breaths. Somehow it helped him feel safe, though it didn't ease his dreadful worry. His best friend was out there somewhere. Was he alone? Was he cold or hungry?

Those thoughts devoured his mind. He didn't think of anything else until an odd noise pierced through the quiet.

Tap, tap.

Tweek's head rose from his pillow.

Tap. Tap.

It sounded like knuckles knocking against glass from somewhere across the room.

"Craig?" he whispered hopefully.

He tried not to disturb his mom as he crawled out of the bed, but the moment his feet touched the floor he ran to the window.

Tap. Tap.

He drew his curtains and looked on the roof. There wasn't anyone on the other side. There was only a blanket of blackness that fell over his back yard. Still, he opened the window and stuck his head onto the rainy breeze.

A gust of wind blew into his room strong enough to rustle his curtains. It felt ice-cold, just like it did when David tried to show him things.

Unnerved, he slammed the window closed and pulled the curtains together.

Tap, tap. Tap, tap.

It was louder and disturbingly persistent. Something was out there.

It wanted inside.

The twelve-year-old darted back to his bed and crawled in close to his mother's side. He practically buried himself under her back. She stirred and sucked in a heavy breath, but otherwise didn't wake.

There was as rustling from across his bedroom. Again, the shaken boy turned his head to the window. The persistent tapping turned into scratching. It was not the limb of an unruly tree causing a racket like most would assume. It was solid bone. Hard, bloody tips scraped against the glass as the monstrosity they belonged to tried to pry open the window.

"Mom," Tweek croaked in apprehension.

In the dark, it was hard to see. Often times he'd notice figures and shadows, faces and bodies. He always told himself it was just his imagination. They were all just in his head, David being the exception. This, though, it was more than the flash of a face or a quiet murmur.

It was opening his window, which, to his horror, he left unlocked.

He grabbed his stuffed turtle off his nightstand and squeezed it tight. From his toy's back, the room became illuminated by faded green shapes. The breeze again seeped into his room. Curtains fluttered and swayed, and a twisted figure made its way inside. His breath caught in his throat when he watched the dark mass of distorted limbs tumble on the floor, leaving dark streaks of sludge dripping down his wall. It hissed and choked as it convulsed.

Tweek slammed his eyes closed as he heard it dig its bony fingers into the carpet. The only thing that horrified him more was its grotesque gurgling slowly inching closer.

It was dragging itself towards his bed.

It's all in my head, he thought through brimming tears. It's a bad dream. A bad dream.

His bed frame groaned beneath him and his mother, and a faint grumbling seeped up through his mattress. It was less like random noise and more like a weeping child. Less like a monster and more like...

Craig.

Tweek rolled out of bed.

A disgusting trail of bodily fluids and wet earth slathered across his carpet. He stuck his nose up at the rancid smell. Shivers worked their way up his spine. The dark streaks did indeed disappear under the edge of his bed. After much deliberation, he lifted the blankets to peer underneath. He

wasn't nearly as brave as his actions made him seem. If he hadn't been convinced he'd heard Craig's voice, he'd be sobbing under his blankets instead.

"Craig?" Tweek whispered. "Is that you?"

He pressed the back of his stuffed turtle again, which lit the dark space with tiny green moons and stars.

He had been right.

Bloody fingertips stripped of their flesh dug into the base of his box spring. A small form slathered in mud and streaks of dark blood latched to the underbelly of his bed, hanging there. He could see its multiple bruised, bare limbs twisted awkwardly around its body as it heaved. The horrid creature was gasping desperately for breath.

"What happened to you?"

His turtle's green light cast a colorful glow on the bloody mess as it began to move towards him. All he heard was the grinding and popping of bones as a small face peeked out from behind its rotting arm. Or, at least, what was left of a face.

Tweek slapped his hand over his mouth to hide a scream at the terrible sight. By instinct, he jolted away from the bed and tumbled back to the floor.

Oh, God. Oh, Jesus fucking Christ.

Once he gathered his bearings, he quickly crawled back to the bed and yanked the skirt back up. His turtle was still lighting the small space, but, to his alarm, there was nothing there but a few boxes and an old pair of socks.

No gory monster, and no bloody mess on the carpet.

"Craig? Where'd you go?" Tweek gasped with tears in his eyes.

The only evidence that his friend had been there at all was the faint sound of heavy breathing that lingered around his bed. He searched all night to try to find the source of it. After all, Craig was there somewhere, and he was hurting.

Craig was hurting.

Five years.

Five years two months and seven days ago.

If he thought hard enough, perhaps he could even count down to the very second it happened. All those years ago. Those months and days ago, it occurred. His mother asked him a question that triggered the misery and desperation his life became.

"Have you seen Craig?"

He dug his fingers into his sandwich. It was butter and jelly. Not peanut butter, but real butter. The yellow kind a normal person would use for things like toast.

Tweek liked it better.

He looked up at his lunch table. It was empty, aside from him and the shuddering creature hiding

between his legs.

The other kids abandoned him a long time ago. At first, they taunted and bullied him. He was a prime target, after all. Spewing out his make-believe of ghosts gave them plenty to work with. He was practically begging to be shoved in a locker.

However, their mindless torture stopped in middle school.

When their fear began.

They believed he wasn't any normal person. He was something so frightening they wouldn't dare to say a word to him. They wouldn't risk bumping into him in the hallway, sitting with him at lunch, or even throwing him a pity greeting.

No one would risk being his friend, let alone his bully.

He was cursed, they said. Cursed.

Tweek believed so, too.

Perhaps he could try to conjure up an argument for his normality, but a point would be hard to make. The little hands gripping the backs of his legs were enough in themselves to prove he wasn't normal. As if in agreement, a low and guttural noise gurgled up from between his knees. If Tweek had to put an image to it, he thought it sounded like someone choking on blood.

"Thanks for that. If you were just going to make fun of me all day you should've stayed home," Tweek reasoned before taking a bite out of his sandwich.

More gurgling followed. It wasn't a pattern of speech. It was just grotesque sounds. Sounds Tweek had grown used to.

He looked down in his lap to try to catch sight of the creature. However, there wasn't anything to see. There were only the tips of hard bone scraping against his pant legs.

He continued to attend to his growling stomach and not think about it.

He was sinking his teeth into bread and jelly when he happened to glance up in the wrong direction.

Two familiar faces came out of the lunch line. They walked close beside one another with their trays in hand. One was sporting a rather stylish purple pea coat. The other had a red jersey tied around his waist, though he belonged to no team. They were both smiling and happy.

Token and Clyde.

At one time, he would be smiling with delight as he watched those same people approach his table and plop down beside him. Now, he only looked down at his lunch bag so he wouldn't have to see them navigate the tables to avoid coming near his.

It had been some time since he spoke to either of them. They couldn't understand what he was going through, and he couldn't understand why they wouldn't help.

They left him abandoned, like everyone else.

The large room was buzzing with conversations. Groups of friends, large and small alike, enjoyed one another's company. They gossiped and exchanged secrets. They listened to one another and

told jokes. Every table had company and laughter, all except for his.

"Let's go," he muttered under his breath.

He stood abruptly from his lonely seat. The mangled figure that huddled between his knees was gone, but not far.

Craig was never far.

No one seemed to notice as he carefully navigated around their tables. No one noticed when he pushed past the wide double doors to the cafeteria and slipped into the hall. No one noticed him. No one at all.

He moved quickly through the guts of the building. The halls were barren and empty. The only sounds he heard were the squeaking of his sneakers and a pair of barefoot feet mimicking his footsteps. The lights flickered and cracked as he walked beneath them.

"Stop messing with me, would you," he demanded.

Those same footsteps continued from behind. Tweek didn't stop to look back, and he paid no mind to the quite murmur of mischievous giggles that echoed through the hall. Giggles that were not Craig's, though they came from him.

Soon, Tweek found himself at a small emergency door that lead to the field behind the school. When he stopped and took a hold of the handle, the disembodied sound of slapping feet came to a halt behind him.

"Why are you so talkative today?" Tweek asked before finally turning around and gazing back into the empty hall.

There was nothing.

Huffing in exasperation, Tweek shoved open the exit and snuck outside. He immediately felt a weight lift off of his chest the moment his sneakers landed on cement. Out there by the loading docks, he was safe from everyone else.

Safe, but cold.

He zipped his green hoodie up to his chin and clutched his paper lunch bag in his hand. After a few moments of walking along the brick wall of the school, he spotted who he'd been searching for. A group of four sat in a row against the brick wall. They huddled under the awning that sheltered another back door. He could faintly hear their music playing and see the smoke wafting from the ends of their cigarettes. They all wore dark clothes, and their hair was dyed to match. They reminded him much of crows huddled together on a telephone line. He wrapped his arms around himself as he approached, then offered a friendly wave hello.

"Ah. If it isn't Spooks," Michael, the tallest of the four, said. He tightened his black jacket around his torso before he took another long drag.

Tweek nodded slowly before joining the crows in their line. He sat down where the awning cut away, which kept a good bit of distance between him and them.

Most definitely, he was an outlier. A canary like himself didn't fit into their gothic flock, let alone their circle of friends. However, unlike the rest of the school, they weren't afraid of him. In fact, they embraced his weirdness with an odd interest no one else bothered to have.

"How's your demon friend today?" Michael asked between puffs of his cigarette. "D-demon?! Craig's not a demon!" Tweek argued passionately. "He's creepy, but he's friendly!"

"Okay then," Michael said. "How's Casper?"

Tweek sighed as he again dug through his lunch bag for his half eaten sandwich. He never knew how to respond when they asked him questions like that. Usually, he'd just keep Craig and all the other ghouls to himself. Then again, he rarely talked to the living at all. He could never tell if they were making fun of him.

Conversations with the Goths were no exception.

"Needy," he replied with a cracking voice.

He knew where the puffing warmth on his neck was coming from, and it wasn't the breeze. He counted each of Craig's breaths while he chewed on his sandwich.

"It's been a few days since you came to see us," another, very female, voice noted aloud. Tweek looked past Michael to find who'd spoken, Henrietta.

She was a carbon copy of the others when it came to her style. She wore a black halter top decorated in lace, along with an unzipped black hoodie. A black pair of jeans.

Black, black. Black, black. Black.

Tweek couldn't understand what was so great about such a listless color.

"Uh, yeah. We've been eating in the lunch room," he admits.

"Why?" Michael butts in. "The place is crawling with those petty conformists."

Tweek stopped to think for a moment. Why?

"To try to feel normal, I guess," Tweek admitted quietly. "I'm sick of everyone being scared of me."

He pulled on the strings hanging from the holes in his pants. He still counted each breath Craig puffed on the back of his neck.

One hundred seventeen. One hundred eighteen. One hundred nineteen.

"There isn't anything 'normal' about you, Spooks," Henrietta replied. She leaned forward to get a better look at the boy counting to himself. "Stop trying to blend in with all the maggots infesting this place. It's bad for your health."

"Yeah," Michael agreed as smoke rolled out of his nostrils. "Who gives two shits if the conformists don't like you, anyways? As if their thoughts aren't tainted by this disgusting society."

Pete and Firkle remained quiet, though they nodded their heads in silent agreement. For the first time in a long time, Tweek felt touched.

Tweek spent the rest of the hour in silence. He ate while listening to their chatter and weird music, and his jaw synced his chews with the quiet rhythm of Craig's labored breathing puffing in his ear.

Meanwhile, back in the depths of the school building, Kyle sat at his own lunch table. It really wasn't much different from any other day that year. He and Kenny McCormick sat side by side

across from Butters Stotch and Eric Cartman. Like Tweek, few words left his mouth those days. His communication widdled down to small smiles and few word sentences. He was always too tired to engage himself in conversations with his friends or bicker with that lard-ass Cartman.

He swirled his fork in spaghetti while listening to the buzz between Cartman and Kenny. Butters was also too absorbed in reading a copy of that day's newspaper to pay much mind.

"You know, I never liked that movie much. The acting was shitty and the monster was cheesy as hell," Eric said with his nose upturned.

"The monster wasn't scary, no, but who cares if the acting was good. The chick was hot as hell," Kenny said with a small smirk. "I mean damn, you saw that sex scene, right?"

"Wow, you guys!" Butters exclaimed, interrupting a rare moment in which Eric and Kenny weren't trying to tear one another's throats out. "There's a story about the Shadowman in the papers again."

Kenny and Eric both stopped dead conversation. The heavier of the two rolled his eyes in disinterest.

They weren't surprised by what Butters told them.

Everyone at the table had already heard the story before. In fact, everyone in South Park had. It was happening for years, after all. Since they were still kids, even. Every article was the same retelling of the same phenomena they'd known all their lives.

"Oh, come on, Butters. Shadowman isn't real. He's just some dumb story our parents told us so we'd shit ourselves so bad we wouldn't sneak out at night," Cartman said before taking a bite of his pizza.

"O-oh yeah? Then how do ya explain all the holes?" Butters argued. "They're huge and they've been showing up forever!"

"God damn it, Butters. Animals. Animals dig up the ground all the freaking time. You expect everybody to believe they're made by some psycho ghost?"

Kyle huffed to himself as he soaked up the banter.

Shadowman.

They said he was the ghost of a man who'd drown in Stark's Pond. A bitter, angry man who found someone in bed with his wife when he came home an hour early. A savage, psychotic man who confronted her about what he'd seen with the jagged blade of a hunting knife.

After chopping her into pieces, he stuffed heavy, bloody bags into the back of his truck. He drove to Stark's Pond to do what all psychotic murderers do: dispose of bodies.

However, his plot failed when said truck veered off of the road and plummeted into the murky waters. His evidence was indeed disposed of, along with himself, as they sunk to the muddy bottom. The story wasn't over. Every night since, he came out of the lake to finish what he started. The black, eight foot tall, phantom littered the waterline and woods alike with deep holes to hide the pieces of his dismembered wife.

And, as the story goes, if you caught him in the act, he'd dispose of you, too.

They all had seen hundreds of his holes over the years. Everyone who went to Stark's did. They

even found one big enough for Kenny to lay in, despite the mud and worms.

However, not one of them ever caught a glimpse of the infamous Shadowman. Not even Kyle. He definitely sensed presences there. He'd even seen childlike apparitions, but a Shadowman wasn't among them.

"Well, you know what," Butters said confidently as he held the newspaper out before him. "Just listen to this, since you don't believe me!"

He held the paper up to his face and read aloud the headline: "Shadowman Caught on Camera."

Being the rebel he was, Butters turned the large page and skipped ahead to the very last paragraph.

"Whoa!" He exclaimed before clearing his throat and reading the paper for everyone to hear. "Here for the first time, local fisherman, Ricky Malkinson, has caught photographic evidence of Stark's Shadowman! He captured this ghostly image at around 11:00pm while boating with his son- Oh hamburgers, would you look at that!"

The whole table shifted close to get a look at the ghost that's haunted their imaginations since childhood. Even Kyle stood up to follow Kenny around the table and eyeball the evidence.

It was definitely the shore of Stark's. They recognized the woods well. The image was clear, mostly. There was just one exception.

Kyle's eyes widened when they took their fill of a black mass in the trees. That in itself wouldn't have been very impressive to him. What was impressive was the number of orbs. They were dim, circular lights that seemed to be retreating through the trees along with the dark specter.

Everyone else continued the conversation as Kyle stared intensely at the small square on the paper.

"Geez, I guess people are offering money for information and pictures and stuff," Butters muttered more to himself than his friends.

"Of course they are," Kenny replied as he made his way back to his seat. "Someone's been ripping up the ground around Stark's forever. The park rangers are probably sick of having to fill all those holes in."

"Shit. I wonder how much they'd pay for pictures like that," Cartman said while stroking his chin.

"I don't like that look on your face, Eric," Butters said while folding up the paper.

"Really, though, just think about it! They're offering money for a picture, right? Now, think about how much we made if we got video. No, no! If we caught it!" Cartman was nearly foaming out the mouth with possibilities.

Kenny swallowed hard and played with his lunch. Pizza, which Kyle purchased on his behalf. Honestly, a ghost hunt in the woods is just the kind of thing he found fun in. Some things were more important than having fun.

"Sounds great and all," Kenny interrupted before leaning back in his chair. "But how in the hell are you expecting to find that thing, let alone catch it? If it turns out Shadowman is real, the last thing you'd want is to catch him trying to hide body parts."

"Yeah! And you don't even believe in him!" Butters added with a twisted expression.

"Oh, please. If he is real, he's just some guy in a robe trying to scare people. If he's not, we'll throw a robe on Butters and film him stumbling around in the woods."

"H-hey!" Butters protested. "I'm not even tall enough!"

"So," Kenny scoffed, "our options are either playing Scooby-Doo in the woods at night or staging a hoax. No thanks."

"Oh, come on. Usually, you'd be itching for a little adventure. Especially if it meant we'd make money. Don't tell me playing babysitter for the Jew turned you soft."

"He is not my babysitter. I don't need anyone to take care of me," Kyle snapped before Kenny could get a word in. He crossed his arms and huffed. It gave the opposite effect of what he was pinning for.

"Prove it," Cartman challenged, eyes narrowing and grin widening. It was hard to get under Kyle's skin those days. Eric was not about to pass up an opportunity to push his buttons.

"F-fine!" Kyle hissed. "I'll come on your pissy little adventure."

Kenny furrowed his brows in worry. "The last thing you need is to get caught up in Cartman's bullshit right now."

"I can make decisions for myself," Kyle mumbled under his breath. He took a big bite of his lunch as if that would exempt him from having to say anymore.

"Ey, you heard the man, come stain. Ginger wants an adventure. Who am I to deny him of that?" Eric butt in, obviously more giddy than neither Butters nor Kenny felt comfortable with.

There was one undeniable truth about their group: If Cartman was excitedly scheming, something was going to go wrong.

"Great, then," Cartman uttered before ripping open his milk carton. "Meet me and Butters there tonight. 9pm, sharp. This time tomorrow, we'll be famous."

"Tonight? Dude, it's going to be pouring down rain," Kenny objected.

"Psh, you know we aren't the only ones who thought of this. The promise of money is all over the papers. If we go in the rain fewer people should show."

He was good at plotting, Kyle had to give him that much. Still... even he couldn't deny the sinking feeling in his stomach.

The Circle

His limbs felt chilled like he'd just been shoved into a freezer.

His body felt suspended in a fixed place in time.

He could move and jerk about, but never make contact with anything. He could open his eyes, but saw only a brownish black gradient of an abyss.

His body was floating in a void. Every part of him yearned for warmth as he struggled to breathe in. As he kicked and thrashed he heard familiar sounds. It was a muddy and distorted sloshing.

It was then he realized not only was he floating but also wet.

Panic set in when he finally gasped, only to be met with a throat full of ice cold water. He moved closer to the bright brown beams of color. Despite this, he knew he wouldn't make it to the surface conscious.

In that moment he had that terrible revelation a large pair of hands broke through the shining rays of ripples. His heart leaped out of his chest with relief.

They grabbed his wrists. He joyously expected to be heaved up out of the dark pit, but his rejoicing gave way into horrified shock. Those hands tightly wound themselves around his throat, and then pressed him back down deeper into the water.

He was so close to the surface. He could see distorted colors dancing in the chaos of the water. In fact, he could almost make out the face of his attacker.

Almost.

He gasped in a painful mouthful of water, which proved his undoing. His vision blurred, and his lungs burned like hot iron against his insides.

His body lurched in his sheets. He took in another gasp for air, and, thankfully, his lungs filled with it.

"Oh, Jesus. Oh, Christ," Tweek cried out.

Ripples of relief waded through his flesh when he realized he was in his room. However, the happiness didn't last long. Yet again, that same terrible dream left him awake and shaking in his bed.

Sleep was impossible ever since Craig snuck into the window a week prior. His dreams were plagued by nightmares. Nightmares that left him so petrified he tried to avoid sleep all together, not that he got very much of it beforehand.

He'd missed a lot of school because of it. Despite his fear of sleep, he took to lying in bed for hours on end. Hours on end with no interruptions from David, the man in the attic, oddly enough.

Maybe David's absence had something to do with the breathing that still lingered in the air. That heavy, throaty breathing.

He heard it all the time as if Craig was still clawing away at the underbelly of his bed. However, there was nothing there.

He rubbed his forehead with small hands and took to chanting about how much pressure it all was. It was the only thing the child could do to spare himself from violent sobbing.

He'd been crying a lot that week. Usually, his mother would hear and come into his room. She'd sit with him and sing his favorite lullaby: Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

That particular night, though, he was alone. His parents were sleeping soundly in their room down the hall. He knew for sure no one would hear him, so he let it come bubbling out.

His eyes became wet; his pillowcase did, too.

The tiny muscle thumping in his chest was breaking. He felt so isolated, and he still was missing Craig. He tried and tried so hard to find him. He looked through the closet, under his bed, and even went up in the attic in hopes of coming across him. However, all he found were a few old pairs of socks and an oddly spooked David. There was no Craig. Not anywhere, despite the fact that Tweek could still occasionally hear his labored breathing.

A sob broke out of him.

He pressed his face hard into the fluff of his pillow to conceal his wretched wailing. It all just hurt so badly. Too badly.

It was then an odd sound cut through his cries. A disembodied murmuring floated through the room. The faint sound let centipedes loose under Tweek's skin.

It was humming.

Just like the heavy breathing that plagued his bed, it didn't seem to have a source. It mimicked the tune his mother would sing when she'd caught him crying, though it most definitely did not sound like her.

It was quivering and small, but shrill like nails scraping against a chalkboard.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

Voices echoed throughout his room like a children's choir.

"Up above the world so high."

In his fear, the little boy reached down beside his bed to fetch his light up stuffy turtle. He knew the light wouldn't deter them. It never stopped David's shadowy figure from standing at the foot of his bed, but it always brought him the littlest bit of comfort.

He leaned down a little further with tiny fingers outstretched.

Something small and cold brush against his lax hand. However, he didn't have the chance to pull away. He laid in confused and terrified silence as freezing cold fingers interlaced with his own and gently squeezed.

"Like a diamond in the sky."

The hand belonged to something beneath his bed.

He pushed fear aside. The boy bit down on his lip as he squeezed back. The skin was chilled and damp like wet paper. He could easily feel every hard bone hiding beneath it, though he couldn't find the rhythmic throb of a heartbeat.

There was just cold and quivering meat.

"Craig," Tweek whispered, absolutely sure of who he was touching.

The cold hand trembled, and Tweek squeezed tighter as if he could warm it with his own.

It was then, from the darkness under his bed, he heard one sentence. It didn't sound like it was coming from one person, but rather the plethora of young children who'd been trying to sing him to sleep.

"It's so cold."

Their raspy voices whimpered in unison. Tweek thought that if he listened carefully enough, he could make out one that sounded particularly familiar.

"You can come up under the blankets," Tweek still offered hopefully, despite his friend's grotesque form.

"It's so cold," was the only reply he'd gotten in return.

It made him frown deeply.

"How do I make you warm, then?"

Just like that, the fingers he was clutching so tightly to slipped away from his grasp and disappeared underneath his bed.

...

Rain as thick as black oil pounded on their heads. The soles of their shoes sank deep into the wet ground. Lightning cracked across the black sky and thunder roared like an ancient behemoth. They knew it'd be raining, but they hadn't expected such a storm. Still, thanks to Kyle's stubbornness, he and Kenny made their way towards their rendezvous point: The old bathrooms of Stark's Pond.

It was a good spot for spying on the pond, Kyle had to give his friends that much. Though he wished they picked somewhere a little less... rancid to stake out in. His discomfort was only pushed towards deeper levels when he sensed an ominous shift in the air. The closer they walked towards the darkened woods the higher Kyle's hair stood on end.

His slender fingers gently brushed against a yarn bracelet tied around his wrist.

"Sure you wanna go through with this?" Kenny asked loudly through the sounds of the storm as they came upon the rickety shack of a bathroom.

Kyle paused a short moment as if he might be reconsidering. Though he ended up nodding his head with resolve. There was obvious doubt in Kenny's eyes. No matter how interesting Cartman's newest escapade seemed, he couldn't shake the feeling that such an adventure wasn't good for Kyle.

Not then, when he was already having such trouble healing.

"Don't worry, Kenny," Kyle assured with the smallest of smiles. "I can handle it. Besides, when have any of us ever seen Shadowman? We'll probably just dress up poor Butters and call it a night."

Kenny allowed a small frown to break through. Kyle didn't see it as he pulled open the door to the bathroom. Well, it looked more like a shed than a bathroom, both inside and out. The walls were constructed from the tin roof of an old barn. The wooden frame was just the same, and the

plywood floor was covered in dirt and filth. Luckily, there were at least stalls shielding their eyes from the horror of the filthy commodes.

The first thing they noticed when they stepped into the shoddy building was Eric Cartman leaning up against the shack-like structure's wooden frame. He was fiddling with a rather expensive looking camera and didn't bother to look up at the pair as they entered.

"Ah, I see you guys decided to show, after all," Eric said. He was trying to sound uncaring, but Kenny caught the small rise of excitement hidden under his drawl demeanor. "Good to see you finally found your ballsack, Kyle."

"Yeah, whatever," Kyle responded in a mutter. All the spunk the redhead had at lunch had yet again vanished.

Eric would just have to pry harder to get a rise out of him, he supposed.

"H-hey, don't mess around with it like that," Butter pleaded as Cartman mindlessly fiddled with the camera. "If you mess it up- oh, gosh, I'd be grounded forever."

After Butters and Eric were finished bickering, they set to work. The front door was propped open with a large rock so they could keep a lookout, though Butters had to set up the night vision on his father's camera. "He was really into photography for a while," Butters explained as he scrolled through a menu on the screen. Though that's all he said before blathering about how scared he was of being caught with it.

The night wore on as well as the angry storm. The only sound that cut through its persistent pounding were their own echoing voices. Kyle and Butters lost interest with the steak out about an hour in. They huddled together in a lump on the nasty floor to watch Eric and Kenny take turns with the camera. No Shadowman mysteriously appeared to tear up the wet earth, and Eric's frustration was steadily growing.

"Well, I guess this isn't going to be as fun as I hoped," he grumbled before passing the camera to Kenny. Kyle and Butters watched through the beams of their flashlights as he made his way towards a backpack propped up on a wooden ledge. With a loud zip, Eric yanked the bag open to proudly reveal his plan B: a large black trench coat.

"What do you think, Butters? Does it look about your size?" he questioned with the cock of his brow.

"O-oh, hamburgers," Butters squeaked. "I don't wanna wear that thing! I will never get ungrounded if my parents find out I'm even out here! I don't wanna know what they'd do if I stage a hoax!"

"Yeah, yeah, we're all very concerned," Eric sighed while holding the coat open. "Now get over here."

"Holy fucking shit, there is no way," Kenny blurted.

"What? What is it?" Eric asked, distracted from Butters.

"Holy fucking horse shit!"

Frustrated, Kyle lurched up off the floor and practically jogged to his friend. Kenny shoved the camera into his chest and pointed out the door.

"Look," he demanded with his eyes wide.

Before the redhead could even glance into the camera Butters and Eric were gathered around him to stare at the screen. He pointed it back out the door and slowly scanned the wilderness.

Kyle's mouth dropped open in utter disbelief.

There in the wind and rain stood a man. He was close enough to the outhouse that Kyle could make out the hood on his head and the long, pointed tool at his side. Could this really be it? By some stroke of unfathomable fortune did they really happen upon the demon of Stark's Pond? The thought made his heart rattle in his chest like rusted nails in a tin can.

"Whoa!" Butters whispered shrilly. He jammed his finger towards the camera's display as if to rub the image in Eric's face. "See, it's him! I told you he was real! O-oh, hamburgers, I sure hope he doesn't find us in here."

"Find us?" Cartman said with a proud air of determination that made Kyle feel beyond uncomfortable. "It's us who found him. You guys ready?"

"Wait, you were fucking serious about catching that thing?" Kyle snapped as harsh wind scraped against their shelter. "We don't know who this guy is or what the fuck he's doing out here. You got him on tape, that's enough."

"Well, fine then. I see some of us aren't man enough to see all of this through," Cartman said with a shrug and a sigh. "Well, for anyone who's still got a ballsack: The plan is we take off that hood of his. We get his face on tape, and its KFC every night for the rest of the year."

Kyle believed Eric was overestimating just how much fame and fortune such an encounter would give them.

"Um, great plan and all, but what if Shadowman really is what people say? Or even if he's just a big mean guy in a coat? I d-don't wanna get cut up and buried!" Butters tried to reason. He was still watching the camera intensely. His hands gripped at the thing even though Kyle still hadn't let go. It was hard not to eyeball the massive figure hacking away at the ground.

"He's like twice as big as all of us. Not to mention he's got a shovel," Kyle muttered in agreement.

"Guys, it ran from the guy in the newspaper just 'cause he saw it. We all go after him, we'll catch him for sure. Trust me."

That image from the newspaper. It flashed through Kyle's mind and left him feeling woozy. There were orbs littering that image; the tiny souls that were following Shadowman through the trees. Even if it was a flesh and blood human being, he feared trying to catch it was a crime that would not go unpunished.

"Listen, we need to just leave-" Kyle didn't have time to finish expressing his blatant doubt. Eric snatched the camera out of Butters's hand and bolted full speed out the shack door.

"Eric, wait!" Butters tried to insist, but the chunky teen was already shuffling across the grass and towards the edge of the woods.

By instinct, Kyle and Kenny both jolted up to go after their idiotic friend. They ran out into the storm as Butters trailed behind, shouting about how bad of an idea all this was.

Their flashlights shined through the veil of blackness and rain. Their boots squished in pockets of mud and cloudy puddles. They could see Cartman's back, and the looming creature he was running towards.

The massive black figure let out a terrified screech and bolted into the forest at a nearly inhuman speed.

Cartman's simple plan quickly mushed together into a terrible mess. The woods were too dark to keep track of everyone. Even their flashlights weren't good in the violent weather. Kenny ended up in the lead, not even realizing Eric had already ran out of breath and fallen far behind him and the others. Butters was beside the nimble blond as Kenny hurled himself over tree branches and shrubs to keep up with the retreating monster.

Butters; not so nimble.

In his effort to keep up he didn't pay enough attention to where his feet were stomping. Just like that, he lost his footing. Twigs snapped like firecrackers and he let out a strangled yell as he went tumbling into a thorn bush.

"God fucking damn it, Butters! Kenny, Kyle, don't let it get away. Go! Go after it!" Eric shouted urgently. "I'll get Butters!"

Without a second thought, Kenny kept running. Bewildered, Kyle quickly chased after him.

"Kenny, no!" he tried to reason with a scream.

They weaved around trunks of tall trees as Kenny tried to catch up to the shadow they could still just barely see retreating into the darkness. However, Kyle's years in track began to show. He proved agile enough to get right up on his friends tail. He rammed right into him, sending both of them tumbling harshly into the dirt.

"Are you fucking crazy?!" Kyle demanded as he stumbled to his feet. "Chasing the Shadowman through the woods- you've lost your fucking mind! Who knows what that- that thing really is! For God's sake-"

"Dude, look," Kenny whispered.

Kyle's infuriated gaze shifted up to a tree. It was just like all the others, really. Thin, tall, and covered in brown bark. However, there was something rather peculiar that set it apart from the rest.

A nail had been driven right through the chest of a teddy bear, pinning it against the bark. There were others, as well. Stuffed animals, baby dolls, and toy trucks alike all laid in a heap at its roots.

"Shit, there is no way that's real," Kenny said as Kyle stepped forward to get a better look. "That's just... Wow, Sick..."

Something was beckoning him to reach out and touch the impaled teddy bear. He couldn't resist.

"Kyle don't touch that, holy shit," Kenny shouted before grabbing his friend's hand and walking him a few steps away from the odd thing. "We were right- this was a bad idea."

Kyle swallowed hard, but the unsettling feeling in his chest was only made worse by the faint rumbling of thunder in the distance. The rain couldn't get to them well through the canopy of leaves above them, but the storm wasn't letting up.

"We'll come back in the daytime to get a better look, okay? Let's get outta here," Kenny muttered.

Kyle nodded absentmindedly, but Kenny had to practically drag him away from the toy-covered tree.

They could see the beams of their friend's flashlights through the curtain of wood and leaves. They shined theirs back.

The redhead again reached down to fiddle with his bracelet. They walked side by side back down the path they came from. If the swaying trees and flashes of lightning weren't enough to put Kyle on edge, the air had dropped so cold he could feel it seep into his lungs with each breath. His skin was tingling, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up on end.

"Kenny, do you feel that?" Kyle nearly whimpered.

When Ken didn't answer, Kyle turned towards him.

"Aren't you at least-" he was stopped dead. His flashlight was shining where Kenny should have been, but all he saw were the trees.

No Kenny.

No anyone.

"Kenny!" Kyle shouted. His heart was suddenly pounding so hard in his chest he thought it might explode. "Ken, where are you?!"

Leaves crunched under his boots as he tracked back towards the mysterious tree decorated with toys. He didn't want to go back there, but Kenny couldn't have just vanished into thin air. He had to be somewhere nearby.

As he tried to track down their path, he realized nothing looked familiar. The trees and bushes somehow morphed, or he'd wandered onto the wrong trail. He stood still as he tried to work it out in his head. The panic didn't truly set in until he realized he could no longer see Eric and Butter's flashlights through the trees.

"Cartman, Butters!" he screamed as loud as he could. He was hoping his friends might yell back, but he was only met with a silence so eerie it left his skull buzzing.

There were no chirping crickets or hooting night owls. Not even the yellowing leaves rustled in the wind. In fact, the storm seemed to have vanished just as Kenny had.

The snapping of a single twig cracked through the trees. He shined his flashlight into the foliage.

"Kenny?" He questioned softly.

There was more rustling. The sound of humming oozed out from between the thin tree trunks and onto Kyle's path. There seemed to be a chorus chiming a quiet tune. The sound of feet scuffing against the autumn ground also bounced around inside his skull. There was only one path that seemed familiar to him, and the voices were dancing on it.

He reached to his wrist and rubbed his bracelet for comfort. It gave him the assurance he needed, but his legs still wobbled and his breath became rapid as he turned off his flashlight.

He didn't want to go without the light helping to guide him forward, but he didn't want to risk being seen. Stay low. Stay quiet.

He pushed past small trees and prickly bushes as he let his thumping chest guide him towards the echoing sound. It seemed to be coming from every direction.

The low branches of a thorn bush grabbed onto his pant leg, digging its sharp edges through the cloth and into him. He hissed and tried to untangle himself with a hard yank. He stumbled over the bush and fell face first in the dirt. Puffing, he wiped his face and gazed up through the tall weeds he'd landed in.

The breath was sucked right out of him.

Through the grass and ivy, he caught a glimpse of feet. Many pairs of small feet. They were nearly impossible to see through the dark of night, but they were there.

Bouncing playfully.

The quiet laughter and unsettling tune he'd heard before were all too clear now.

There were children, and they were holding hands. Up to a dozen, maybe. He was too scared to count heads.

They were formed into a circle, dancing as they held onto one another. He quieted his breath the best that he could.

A mass lurched in the center of their circle. It rose from the ground like a small, black, hill. What was most unsettling was to watch it shutter. An intense feeling of sorrow enveloped Kyle's being when he watched it try and fail to take a form.

Through the ambiance of a playground full of happy noise, he heard soft sobbing.

The children echoed playful laughter back to the dark form's despaired sounds. It seemed to be trying to join them-trying to play with them.

Their song broke away into mush in Kyle's mind. They shuttered and swayed like pictures on old film, and the thing in the center of their joyful laughter finally rose like a black sheet.

Like it was also a child, it swayed with them.

He wanted to run away. Whatever that thing was starting to take shape. It was very dark but very human. Its head seemed too heavy for it to hold up. Its movements were slow and lagged like that of a zombie. It stumbled and shook on its own two feet, and he found himself thankful it was looking away from him.

This was not the Shadowman he and his friends chased through the woods.

He felt in his guts that it was something far worse.

He very slowly got to his feet. His flashlight was still off, though he was holding it so tightly his knuckles were turning white. His head was filling with so many pictures. Pictures of faces. Pictures of little boys with light hair and blue eyes. He stepped back and away from the ghostly figures and their play.

Much to his horror, he backed into the same thorn bush that tripped him. It rustled loudly, and Kyle's heart stopped when the children's playful noises seized.

His eyes shot up towards the figures. The stumbling zombie of a spirit slowly began to turn its head towards him. A god-awful cracking and snapping resonated from the thing's unsteady spine. Its body didn't budge, but its head kept turning.

He faced its grotesque form as he backed quickly away. He didn't want to risk turning his back to the gurgling monster. And, as its head finally turned to face him full on, he realized it was indeed just that.

A monster.

Two gaping holes were gouged out of its face where eyes should have been. Black, tar-like grime oozed from the deformities. Its true horror wasn't revealed until the children ran away to hide. With pale, mud-streaked legs it wobbled towards him. Jagged, long teeth protruded from its wide jaws so wildly it couldn't close its own mouth. Its feet left the ground, but its many, many, spiderlike arms did not.

He let out a horrified shriek when it came barreling towards him.

He forced his way through bushes and weeds, all the while trying to keep his feet moving faster than the gurgling beast scrambling for him. The soles of his shoes slammed into the dirt when he made his way back to the path, but he didn't stop running. It was screaming from behind him, and he felt tears of horror brim in his eyes.

"Eric! Kenny!" He screamed desperately.

Kyle shined his light wildly through the trees. He didn't dare to look back. He knew that twisted, shuttering thing was still coming for him. He could hear its knees and hands scraping along the dirt.

He fell.

His flashlight flew from his hand and smashed into the ground as he was pulled back by his ankle. Screaming and flailing, he kicked at the creature that'd ensnared him. The sharp tips of its fingers felt like needles piercing his flesh through his jeans.

"Kenny, help me!" He begged as tears streamed down his face. "Please!"

He kicked it and swore in agony as it clawed at him. As it pulled him closer and closer towards a gaping mouth of sharp teeth.

"Stan!"

The beast let out a pained cry and quickly fell away.

Kyle jumped to his feet and didn't hesitate a moment to run off deeper into the woods. His cheeks were cold from the breeze chilling his tears. His jeans were muddy and ripped, and his hands were in the same shape.

All of him was aching down into his core, but he could hear that thing screaming in the distance. He couldn't stop.

Through the trees that flew by him he saw a yellow light. Without a second thought, he sped through thorn bushes and poison ivy towards a structure amidst the trees. It was a house. A single light shined through the back door. He was only a yard away from salvation when he heard the trees rustling violently.

He didn't stop when he heard the sickening thump of meat and bone slam into the dirt behind him. He didn't stop when he heard those same hands claw away at the ground to get to him.

He didn't stop.

Not until his feet banged along the rickety porch, and he threw open the door. He turned towards the creature only a second to slam the wooden slab in its face. The beast rammed headfirst into the rotting wood. Kyle grabbed a small metal knob and forced the rusted lock closed. The creature was not deterred. It only got more and more angry as it repeatedly rammed the door with its skull.

Kyle took a panicked look around. A kitchen. He was standing in a decaying kitchen. He pulled out his cellphone. His hands were shaking so badly he could hardly press the right buttons. Kenny. Kenny. He needed to call Kenny.

Just as he pressed on the familiar name, his screen went black.

"What?!" He nearly screamed to himself. "What? No, no. I charged this!"

Boots thumped against creaking floorboards. They weren't coming from the front porch where that creature was. It came from somewhere within the house, and it just kept coming closer.

"Fuck," he muttered. Upon the realization that the light he'd seen was a candle, he thought it best to hide. That house was surely condemned. Whoever or... whatever lit that candle wasn't supposed to be there.

The footsteps grew dangerously clear. He quickly scrambled for the counter. Most of the cabinet doors had fallen off or broken. However, there were a few just good enough for a hiding place. He squatted down and quickly climbed into the nasty cupboard.

Kyle tried to slow his breathing and remain silent. Peering through the sliver of an opening between cabinet door and wood, he watched an odd scene unfold.

The doorknob leading into the kitchen turned and, with a loud creak, came open. There was a man behind it. He was ridiculously tall, from what Kyle could tell. His slender body was draped with a pitch black robe. The black was soiled with mud. The figure's face, however, was too high up for Kyle to see through his loose door.

It laid a soiled shovel down on the table across the dingy kitchen.

The Shadowman.

While Kyle gawked at the black figure the disturbing monstrosity that chased him to that house was still heaving itself at the locked door.

"You're so loud," the Shadowman complained in a whisper. It was so quiet, Kyle almost didn't hear it.

He watched from his hiding place as the black form ghosted across the room. Without making a sound, Kyle shifted to keep his limited gaze on what was happening. His breath caught when the Shadowman's black hands slid open the lock keeping the beast out. It was then the door busted open with a startling slam. That... thing fell inside. Its wild limbs and distorted face slammed against the floor, and the Shadowman only sighed.

"Come here," he said, extending his arms out to the warped mass of flesh. Kyle just couldn't help but think he'd heard that voice before. It was so hauntingly familiar it scraped shivers up his trembling arms.

Kyle watched wide-eyed as long, pale arms grabbed at the Shadowman's broad shoulders. The

creature hoisted itself up onto his body. Bones cracked and ground as it wrapped its legs around his torso. While screaming bloody murder, the horrible beast shuddered up towards the man's face.

To help calm the distressed thing in his arms, the tall, black mystery phantom sang aloud whilst bouncing his pint-sized monster like a child. "Twinkle, twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are."

The majority of said monster's fingers had been stripped of their flesh, and Kyle watched in horrid fascination as the eyeless beast reached its bones up towards the cloaked man's face.

"Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky."

Its once shrill shrieks were reduced to gentle coos. A face that was plagued by rows of jagged teeth showed nothing of the sort. Its multiple mangled limbs were gone, leaving behind only two arms and two legs. However, Kyle could see part its face through the crack, and its eyes remained gouged out of its head.

"There you go, all better, right?"

The tall figure didn't budge an inch. It just allowed the seemingly blind creature to knock off his hood and run its muddy hands all over his face. The tall man's lips had stopped moving, but his odd companion continued his song in a low, eerie hum.

Kyle tried desperately to get a look at the man's face. He squinted and carefully lowered himself down, which eventually granted him a sight that left him rattled with more questions than answers. A crooked nose slathered with smudges of mud, round, blue eyes, and a familiar mop of unruly blond hair. As the cloaked man- no, boy, turned away, he said a single thing to his mutilated friend that left their eavesdropper's mind buzzing.

"Come on, Craig."

Despite Kyle's burning curiosity, he laid low and silent. He dared not leave even after the odd pair left the kitchen and shut the door behind them. He stayed, and he waited until he was absolutely sure he would not be caught leaving. The creaky cabinet door was slowly pushed open before he crawled out on his hands and knees.

The kitchen floor was covered in dirt and grime. He grimaced as he stood, and wiped the mess from his hands onto his jeans. The house was decrepit and falling apart. The wallpaper was peeling away and absolutely everything was covered in dust.

He walked calmly out the front door and off of the rickety porch. However, the moment the soles of his shoes hit dirt he ran as fast as he could. He found that his legs were still shaking, and his breath was heavy and rapid from everything he'd just been through. Still, he found the strength to jog back into the orchard of ominously tall pillars of wood. All the while he called out for his friends, hoping that they would hear him.

He didn't think he had any other chance of rescue. As long as he could avoid the ring of dancing children, he would be content.

"Kyle!" he heard someone scream, making him scream.

Suddenly he was lifted off the ground and pulled into someone's arms, though he could only see their orange sleeve in the beam of their flashlight.

"Oh, holy shit, I thought we lost you out here!" Kenny shouted while squeezing him hard.

"Ah!... no, no, I'm... fine," Kyle whispered with his eyes still wide with fright.

His feet were back on the ground, but Kenny's hands were still on his shoulders. His friend was not so convinced.

Butters and Eric, who were standing behind him, didn't seem to be either.

"Oh, man, Kyle. You're shaking like a darned leaf," Butters said as he came quickly to his friend's side. "What happened out there?!"

Kyle shook his head to dismiss the question, though he didn't take another step. He let himself lean against Kenny, all the while still trembling from both fear and the nipping cold.

A hand wiped its chilly skin under his nose. Surprised, he looked up. A red blotch was smudged on Kenny's finger.

"Your nose is bleeding pretty bad. We're gonna take you home, okay?"

Kyle could only wordlessly nod.

Kenny looked over Kyle's head towards Eric who'd been standing a few feet away. He looked almost guilty, which Kenny felt fit.

He pointed a finger in the chunky teen's direction.

"No more of your schemes," he barked lowly. "Ever."

Eric didn't say anything as the group shifted and began to make their way back towards the pond. He only grumbled to himself in frustration. Honestly, nothing had really gone according to plan. He was hoping to get a few laughs in with Kenny, to see a glimpse of the Kyle he knew before the crash.

Not only did Kyle get lost in the woods (which sparked a screaming match between himself and Kenny), but the footage they captured was fucking useless. Despite night vision having been on the video was nothing but a solid black screen accompanied by broken sounds.

The damn fucking shit camera must have been busted.

At the head of the group, Kyle watched his and Kenny's feet step on yellow and orange leaves. They were wet and covered in brown sludge thanks to the storm. Still, the sight somehow helped him slowly recover.

"Kenny?" he whispered carefully.

"Yeah?"

"... what do you remember about Craig Tucker?"

Mini Monster

The front door creaked open somberly. Mr. and Mrs. Tweak turned their heads towards the sound as two people stepped inside their home. One stood nearly as tall as their grandfather clock, while the other was more comparable to the height of a stool. The tallest tucked a piece of blond hair behind her ear. Her other hand was seized by the little girl beside her.

Tweek recognized the people. They were Craig's mom, and his little sister, Tricia.

"Ah, Laura, I wasn't expecting you so soon," said Mrs. Tweak, or Helen, as her friends called her.

Craig's mother nodded as Tricia stared at Tweek. The little boy fidgeted with his stuffed turtle.

"I'm sorry to drop by with such little notice," the woman by the door said weakly. "I just-"

"No, no, Laura," Helen said with the shake of her head. "Our house is your house. Besides, I figured you'd want to pick it up."

Mrs. Tweak wafted across the room in her long green dress. She came beside Tweek and lifted a cardboard box off of the couch beside him. She gave the little boy a subtle yet stern look as if to remind him there would be no talk of ghosts in Mrs. Tucker's presence. Tweek looked down at his turtle while playing with the fabric of its shell.

"Maybe we should have the children run along and play while we grownups talk," Laura suggested with a smile. Tweek could easily tell it wasn't a real one.

"Oh! Yes, of course," Mrs. Tweak uttered while holding the brown square against her chest.

"Tweek, darling, won't you take Tricia up to your room to play for a bit?"

Tweek curled up his nose at the suggestion. He liked Tricia, but, like all seven-year-olds, she could be a bit annoying with her games. Laura patted her little girl on the back to move her along. After a moment's hesitation, Tricia scuttled over to the boy on the couch. Realizing there would be no way out of their awkwardly forced play time, he groaned.

"Okay, let's go," he muttered before pushing himself off the couch. Without another word, he stomped towards the staircase. Tricia played with one of her stumpy pigtails but trailed behind the other nonetheless. Laura kept her gaze locked onto the children as if she was a mother rabbit expecting a hawk.

"Well, now," Tweek's mother said once the children were out of earshot. "This belongs to you."

She passed the brown box off to Laura, who held it against her chest and stared at the interlaced flaps at the top. She fingered the edge of one for a moment before finally opening it. Tweek's father, Richard, took a step closer as she shifted around in the cardboard.

"It's all we could find. I'm sure there are more clothes in the washroom, but all the toys and things he left are there," he said.

Laura's bottom lip trembled as she reached her hand into the treasures against her chest. Toy race cars and pajama shirts seemed to be the only thing the box held. Her slender fingers found the blue fabric of a night shirt. Red Racer was written across the front in red font, though it was hard to make out through her tears.

"Thank you," she offered slowly. Despite her efforts, a small sound of despair fell through the grieving mother's lips.

Slowly, Helen stepped towards her friend. She offered all that she could; a gentle and understanding embrace. Laura gave into the comforting gesture. Feeling safe among friends, she allowed herself to break down into tremors of sobs.

As the parents mourned together below them, Tweek and Tricia sat in silence on his bed. It hadn't been the first time she played in his room. However, their usual lightheartedness was rudely interrupted by Craig's absence. Neither of them knew what to say without him there.

Tricia's blue eyes wandered around his room. She didn't hear the heavy breathing puffing between them. Neither seemed to notice the tall rabbit watching them from the far corner, either; the one in a fancy blue suit and tie. The one gawking at the pair with bulging eyes.

"What do you want to play?" The little girl asked while still playing with her pigtail.

"...I don't care," Tweek admitted softly.

"I brought my Barbies," she said quietly. Without waiting to hear the boy's opinion, Tricia pulled her little backpack off her shoulders and into her lap. She rummaged around in her toys, and then laid one before Tweek.

"This is Stacy," Tricia said. "She's my favorite because her hair is red like mine. You can play with her this time, though."

He picked the tiny doll up from the blanket to investigate as Tricia pulled another toy out from her backpack.

"And this is Janet," she uttered while running her fingers through the doll's blond hair. "She's Stacy's big sister. They fight all the time, but they love each other."

Tricia bumped her doll's face against the one in Tweek's hand. "Muah!"

With a small smile, Tweek gave in. "Okay, what are they going to do?"

"Sister tea party!" Tricia blurted with her arms up over her head. "Stacy is going to go to Janet's house, which is umm... Over there!"

Tweek backed up to put Janet where Tricia wanted, which was on his pillow.

"Okay, and now, um. oh!" Tricia turned around to fetch the plastic tea set from her backpack. However, Tweek tilted his head when the little girl stopped in silent confusion.

"How did you get here?" she questioned aloud before picking up yet another barbie that appeared on the bed behind her.

"Who?" Tweek asked with Stacy still clamped in his hand.

"Her!" Tricia announced as she presented the blue-eyed baby doll to her companion. "She was my big brother's favorite. She stays in my closet... I didn't pack her."

Tweek felt prickles all along his spine. It felt like a cheese grater gnawing away at his vertebrae. The sudden chill that wafted over his body only fostered his fear.

"Let's put her back in the backpack," Tweek suggested quickly.

"No, but what if Craig wants to play?"

The knob of his closet door clanked as it jiggled. Tricia and Tweek looked up in startled silence as the latch clicked. The white door creaked an inch open. Tweek pressed himself against the wall in fear, but Tricia seemed smitten with the darkness. She slid down off of the bed and crept towards it.

"Tricia, no," Tweek demanded.

Tricia took an unsure hold of the knob, then leaned into the closet. Tweek was shaking with anxiousness as he watched the little one slowly lean further and further inside. She was squinting her eyes, as though she was trying to make out a face in the blackness. Once she saw it, whatever it was she saw, she let out the smallest bout of laughter. Her head moved to follow it, and her smile only grew wider the longer she stared.

"Tricia!" Tweek again spat. However, his worried pleas were met with deaf ears.

Overjoyed by what she was seeing, she practically threw herself into the closet. The door slowly pulled together behind her, though it left a sliver of black just wide enough to let the giggling out.

Both sets of giggling.

Tweek threw himself up off of the bed and stumbled to the door. When he went to grab the handle, it slammed closed. Tricia didn't seem to care, though. She just kept laughing as Tweek tried to yank open the door. No amount of twisting or pulling would make it budge. Terrified for Tricia, he scrambled out of his bedroom door. His feet thumped hard as he ran down the hall to the top of the stairs. All three of the adults standing in the living room noticed the little boy at the top stair. He was panting with one finger pointed towards his bedroom.

"What, darling, what is it?" Helen asked as she took a step towards him.

Through his heavy breathing, Tweek said, "He shut Tricia in the closet and he won't open the door."

Helen and Richard exchanged confused glances, but Laura didn't give the strange statement a second thought. She went barreling up the stairs and past the little boy. She was the wounded mother rabbit, and a hawk was swooping in. Her friends came quickly after her, along with their young son.

Laura shoved her way into Tweek's little bedroom, and then nearly tripped over her own feet as she raced towards the closet door. Laura grabbed the handle and pulled with a hard yank. It easily slid open. Inside was little Tricia, hugging a lump of clothes dangling from their hangers. Laura's brow pinched together in relief and confusion. Tricia was much too big for being carried around, but she reached in to pluck up her child anyway. She backed away from the darkness of the open closet with her only remaining child in her arms.

"Look, mommy!" the girl cried out. She pointed into the sweaters and T-shirts with a chubby little finger. Her mom glanced towards that direction, but only for a disinterested second before she turned to leave. One long, trembling arm slowly slid out from between a pair of shirts. It reached for them, almost begging for them to come back. Though Tricia poked her head over her mother's shoulder and happily waved goodbye to the closet, Tweek was sure she couldn't see what he was seeing.

She surely wouldn't have been wearing such a smile if she saw the jutting, sharp teeth of the mouth

trying to smile back. Tweek took a slow step towards the eyeless creature inhabiting his closet. It cried out miserably as Laura disappeared into the hallway, which made Tweek frown.

"I'm sorry... you scared me, or else I wouldn't have told on you."

The arm and the face both sank back into the closet. The white door loudly slammed behind it. Tweek pressed his fingers reassuringly against the wooden slab.

"Don't worry, Craig... they'll be back again eventually."

Steam filled the little bathroom to the brim as hot water poured from the tap. It fogged the mirrors and Tweek's vision. The tiniest of smiles threatened to creep across his cheeks at the sight of the invitingly warm tub. He felt so grimy and gross. Maybe that's because he was always busy with grimy and gross things. Either way, warm bathwater cured all that, even if it was only temporary.

He sat down on the toilet and pulled off his socks. Their white fibers were sullied with dried mud, just like the legs of his pants. Mud and dirt were the causes of most of his trashed clothing. He supposed, though, that couldn't be helped much. He tossed the dirty garments to the floor. A sweat-stained T-shirt and hole plagued pair of jeans added to the smelly pile. God, did he hate feeling so filthy.

He kicked aside the soiled black cloak on the floor to get to the sink, where he stared a moment at the person in the mirror. Oh, wasn't he a hot mess. Heavy blue half circles tugged at the edges of his eyes. His blond hair was sticking out at impossible angles and caked with, you guessed it: mud. He reached up in disgust and violently ran his clumsy fingers through the mess. As if that would help.

His hands shook as he scrubbed his crooked teeth. His chest was tight and his eyes were watery. It was hard to breathe, though that was nothing new.

Those people in the woods. Their loud voices and quick footsteps echoed in his mind like his skull was an auditorium. So many people had come looking for him before, but few had ever caught a glimpse of him. He was too fast. He knew the woods too well. Still, last night he was too careless. Fuck, what if one of them saw his face? What if the cops were on their way to his house right that very moment? They'd been trying to snag him for years! God, how much jail time could someone get for vandalism?

He was breathing heavily, toothpaste foam lingering around his mouth like rabies as he struggled to calm his restless heart. He could practically feel every rapid beat forcing blood through his tight veins.

A giggle.

A quiet, innocent giggle bubbled from behind him. He wiped his mouth of his rabies and turned around, where he was met with a rather odd sight. Craig was floating in his bath water. His little puff ball covered head bumped lazily against the edges of the bathtub. He blew bubbles and giggled at them as they popped at the surface of the water. The tight wire slicing through Tweek's heart loosened, though only a little. He stepped towards the tub, and then knelt down over the edge.

"What are you doing in there?" Tweek questioned gently. "You're gonna get all waterlogged again."

Craig rebelled with more happy bubbles, and Tweek finally smiled.

"Come on," Tweek said as he reached inside and wrapped his arms around the boy's mangled body. He carefully pulled the corpse out of the tub, though the little ghost wasn't so happy about that. He complained with whines as he reached towards the water.

"I'm sorry. I'd let you play in there, but you'll make my water gross."

Craig only continued to whine, in which Tweek responded: "You're thirteen, not five."

He sat Craig down on the toilet, and then grabbed a handful of toilet paper. Craig didn't fuss when Tweek wiped the grimy black tar oozing from his eye-holes. Tweek did that almost every day, for some weird reason. Craig was never sure why since it always came back anyway.

"There you go," Tweek uttered under his breath when he deemed the sopping, bruised skin properly wiped down.

He left Craig to entertain himself on the toilet when he made his way back to the bath. Craig just stared straight forward into blackness as he kicked his feet.

Humming contently, Tweek dipped his head back into the warm water. He figured Craig liked it for more than just fun, seeing as how he stuck like glue to anything that was warm. Heating vents, fireplaces, the hoods of running cars... Tweek opened his eyes slightly when he heard a rustling in the wicker hamper beside the tub. Sweaters.

The little thing took to rooting around in the old laundry. He was leaning over the edge of the hamper, wiggling his arms as he tried to reach the fabric in the bottom. His bloody finger bones left messes on everything he clawed at, but Tweek stopped caring about that a long time ago. The gruesome streaks always disappeared when Craig did.

Tweek was lathering his hair with shampoo when he heard a thump. Gazing back over towards the hamper, he only saw a little pair of feet wriggling around at the top before sliding down with the rest of him.

"Looking for your sweater?" Tweek questioned, though he knew he wouldn't get an answer back. At least not in the form of words.

A low, contented hum came from the bottom of the wicker basket, along with more rustling. One disturbingly long arm crept up from the top of the hamper. It swayed like a bare tree branch in the wind before the shaking fingers at its end finally collided with drywall. Its stretched muscles bent and flexed to pull Craig's limp body up out of the laundry basket. The arm wasn't attached to any of his proper sockets, no. It seemed to be jutting from his spinal cord instead.

Craig tightly held rainbow colored cloth against his chest as extra limbs seemed to sprout from him in every direction. With the help of a spare arm or two, Craig managed to get his head stuck in the colorfully knit cloth.

"You're lucky I'm not scared of spiders," Tweek muttered more to himself than to his ghostly companion.

Craig's mouth suddenly warped into a disturbing show of long, jagged teeth as he let out an ear busting screech. Tweek sighed and covered his ears as the tiny specter's convulsing body slid across the ceiling. His limbs clumped together in a tangled mess as he heaved himself into the bathroom closet. Tweek pulled the curtain partially closed, as such a hissy fit from Craig always equaled an unexpected visitor. Sure enough, a steady knocking came to the bathroom door.

"Tweek, you in there?" the familiar voice of his father questioned. The door creaked open only

slightly, just enough for his voice to find its way in.

"Yeah, I'm in the bath," Tweek said before sinking deeper into the water.

"Ah! I was wondering if you'd like to have some family time with your mother and myself today. Help with dinner- watch some T.V.."

"I was actually thinking about going to the Tuckers'," Tweek admitted. He let his hands glide through the water as he waited for a response.

"Oh, oh, I see," His dad said from the doorway. "Your poor ol' mother and I will just have to spend time all by ourselves, then."

"Damn it, dad, don't guilt trip me," Tweek complained.

"No, it's fine, really. Just be sure to come visit us when were in the old folks home. You know, while you're busy taking care of the Tuckers."

"Pfft, whatever. I'll make it up to you guys tomorrow, how's that?"

There was a silence between them, followed by a low hum. Richard was thinking it over, though Tweek had already gone back to enjoying his bath.

"There is something you could do to make it up to us."

Tweek stopped what he was doing.

"Oh, what's that?" he could hear Craig's bloody fingertips scratching around in the closet. He was growing incredibly antsy.

"I have to take your mom to the dentist today... around like four," Richard explained as he tapped his foot against the floor. "Would you mind watching the shop a little while we're out? Just for a few hours."

"hmm," Tweek chimed as if he had to think it over. "What'll I get for my trouble?"

"The best son of the year award and my undying gratitude," came the reply.

"Annnnd," Tweek practically sang as he kicked his feet up on the edge of the tub. "Free coffee and donuts?"

"Pfft, fine, if food is worth so much more than your parent's pride and love."

"Hey, pride and love doesn't feed my caffeine addiction. It's sad, but I don't make the rules."

By that point, Craig had been throwing a fit. If there was one thing he hated, it was older men. If there was one thing he hated more, it was older men alone with Tweek. Loving fathers were hardly an exception. Hearing the spitting from the closet, Tweek decided to cut conversation short before Craig really threw a tantrum.

"Anyway," he uttered while wiping his sopping hair back. "You got yourself a deal."

"Awesome! Tell Laura and Thomas hi for me!" Richard sang before pulling the bathroom door closed. Tweek only rolled his eyes. Richard loved to con him into stuff. Especially when it came to the shop.

The low, unpleasant rumbling from Craig lasted long after Richard had left the room. Tweek was already toweling himself off when the thin closet door slowly crept open. A little face peered out at him, plagued by jagged rows of snagged teeth.

"He's gone, you freak," Tweek said before throwing his towel at the door, hitting the little ghoul in the face. "I understand being scared of strangers, but you're scared of people we literally see every day."

Craig receded into the closet, stealing Tweek's towel. Probably to sniff it or something weird.

With a sigh, Tweek got to work pulling on his clothes. He didn't really have time for Craig's foolishness. Once clothed, he made the short walk to his bedroom. The attic door was sealed shut, oddly enough. Usually, David was out and about at that time of day. Nevertheless, He grabbed his green hoodie off of his bed post, then he was off. His parents offered goodbyes as he stepped out of the living room and onto the front stoop. He accidentally banged his head on one of his mother's wind chimes, as he usually did when he was leaving the house. It let out an ugly clatter as he walked away towards the sidewalk.

His chest felt tight. The kids in the woods. He knew all of them, considering he'd seen them nearly every day since he was in preschool. He recognized them even through the darkness and pouring rain. They were loud, obnoxious, and always stirring up trouble. Always. If they saw him- if they knew his secret- the whole town would soon enough. The police would come and send him to Juvie for all the property damage, he just fucking knew it. Then he would never get to finish what he started.

When he finally came to the Tuckers' residence his anxiety was only made worse. He was greeted by an army of lawn gnomes. He glared at the little concrete creatures as he stepped around them. He was ever so tempted to kick one over, though that would probably only result in a broken toe. God, how Tweek hated gnomes.

He made it around the pint-sized army and onto the deck, where he tapped at the front door with his knuckles. He ran a hand over his aching ribs with a grimace. Today would be one of those days.

He knocked again, harder that time.

"Oh!," he heard the voice of an older woman utter from somewhere inside the house, "just a moment, please!"

However, the door came immediately bursting open. Tweek nearly tumbled back onto the deck.

"Tweek!" A young, redheaded girl greeted excitedly. "Why did you wait so long to come back over?!"

Tweek smiled weakly and stepped inside.

"I've been busy," he replied. "Where's mom?"

"She's in the kitchen," Tricia said before grabbing Tweek's hand and pulling him through the living room. He heard tiny feet following after them, accompanied by overjoyed laughter.

Craig loved being home.

The footsteps warped in front of them. Tweek saw a small, translucent flash of black as Craig went running into the kitchen to greet his mother. She never felt it when he ran up to wrap his arms around her, but it never stopped him from doing it. Laura was sitting at the table, fidgeting with a

metal mess of gears. She looked up from her work and then smiled at the sight of Tweek. She paid no heed to the bloody little bones tugging at the edge of her dress. She couldn't feel them, no matter how hard Craig pulled.

"Nice to see you've finally stopped by again," she uttered while pushing her chair back. A wall clock laid out on the table before her. It was broken down into bits, but she seemed to know what she was doing when she was piecing it back together.

"You guys act like I wasn't just here last week," Tweek said as he fidgeted with his fingers.

He tried not to stare at Craig as he crawled up underneath Laura's chair. It was always hard to pretend like Craig wasn't there, especially when he was doing hilariously ridiculous or cute things. Which, to Tweek, was pretty much always.

...

Tweek Tweek.

Kyle knew that name well.

He was the blond kid in his English class; the one who was always shaking and twitching. The one who, as far as Kyle knew, didn't have a single friend in the world. Kyle occasionally spotted him at lunch, sitting alone at the table farthest away from every other living creature. Kyle always pitied him. He heard the songs kids used to make up to bully the boy with. He'd seen him shoved in the hallway and heard the venomous words people spat about him. No one believed when Tweek told them the things he'd seen. The things that he believed in. The things about Craig. Not even Kyle remembered what they were. It was a very long time since Tweek spat shaky rants about a missing little boy no one else seemed to care about, but he knew the words only stopped because no one was listening. No one would help.

Kyle wanted to help.

However, the cruel treatment of Tweek Tweek was a terrifying example of what Kyle's life would become if he dared to tell the truth. If anyone knew Kyle believed Tweek, because he had seen them too. He feared reaching out to Tweek would somehow make him like the boy; like the peculiar outcast who lost touch with reality. So, he watched from a distance as the lonely kid spiraled into secluded insanity.

Maybe it was fate that brought him to the pond the night they'd encountered the Shadowman. There was no doubt in Kyle's mind who owned the gruff, familiar voice he'd heard call out to the little monster. Any uncertainty he had was wiped away the moment he heard the word Craig. Shadowman was real, and Kyle would see him again in English class.

"Hey, Kyle," Butters uttered, snapping him out of his mindless trance. "You okay, there? Why, you really haven't said so much lately."

Kyle offered a reassuring smile, the best one he could muster, before nodding his head. "I'm fine, just worried about English..."

Well, it wasn't a lie.

A silver bell rang above Kyle and his group of friends as they filed through the door of the local coffee shop. Butters went there nearly every other day thanks to how much he loved all their silly pastries. And, if Butters was there, one could only expect his entourage of friends to be trailing behind him. It's just how it was.

The goth kids seemed to always have the same idea, seeing as how they lingered at the booth nearest the counter nearly every time Kyle had been there. They'd sip on coffee, glance up at him and his friends, and then mutter lowly about 'conformist maggots'. He didn't care much for them in the first place, but they annoyed him with their unoriginal, condescending insults.

Unfazed by the goths' low chatter, Butters scampered up to the counter. He was ooing and awing at the assorted treats displayed in glass cases as Eric and Kenny, of course, drooled right beside him. It was then, as his friends were making eyes with a pair of iced donuts, Kyle heard something that made him feel like his head was just dunked in a bucket of ice water. A voice.

A chillingly familiar voice.

"How may I help you?" was all it said, but the gruff sound was embedded in his memory.

His friends weren't much fazed by the tall blond boy behind the register. He looked much different since he swapped out his black robe for a green apron, but without a doubt in Kyle's mind; it was the same voice. It felt like long nails dragging over his skin as he stared at the person. It was so rare for Tweek to be the one behind the counter Kyle hadn't even worried about the possibility. And yet, there he was, clear as day.

"Yeah, can I get two of the cinnamon twists, and, um... two of the iced brownies?" Butters questioned while pointing at the goods through the glass. "Oh! And a caramel latte!"

Tweek trembled as his blue eyes scanned over them. He seemed to be overcome with terror at their presence and couldn't will himself to speak. Instead, he just jerked his head in a nod. He turned to fetch a collapsed pastry box off of a rack behind him, though he nearly knocked the whole stack to the floor with a twitch.

"Dude, isn't that that freakish kid from school?" Eric whispered under his breath to Kenny. "The one who sees dead people or some shit?"

"Tweek Tweak, his parents own the place," Kenny replied with a nod.

"Surprised they don't have him locked up in a basement or something," Eric said as the anxious blond worked on mixing Butters' latte.

"Don't be so mean!" Butters scolded just as quietly.

Kyle shivered. The air around him suddenly felt so much colder, and his pulse quickened when a familiar fear overcame him. There was someone else there. He couldn't help but notice the gothic group had them in their crosshairs, too. With black framed eyes, they traced the conformists' every move as they interacted with the twitching barista. It was as if one wrong word would result in a freakish voodoo curse.

Tweek finally turned towards them with a box of treats and a steaming latte. He placed them on the counter, then got to work ringing it up on the register. The boy grimaced as he clicked on the wrong keys. However, the register somehow reached an acceptable total. Butters paid with part of his allowance, and happily accepted the colorful box and his beverage.

"Thank you!" Butters said sincerely. Which, for some reason, earned a small smile from their peculiar cashier. Eric snagged the box away from Butters before they could even manage to step aside.

The blue eyes of the barista met with Kyle's before he uttered in that eerily cracking voice: "And what'll you have?"

Kyle admitted the Shadowman was much less threatening out of uniform, but that didn't change the fact he knew he was being watched. The goths' glares couldn't compete with the eyeless face lingering nearby. He couldn't see it, but he damn sure knew it was there.

"Um, can I just have two vanilla coffees. Two scoops of creamer in both," he uttered like he wasn't shaking down to his marrow. It was so hard to read the intentions of those bright blue eyes. They almost seemed hollow.

Wordlessly, Tweek got to work on Kyle's coffee. Two steaming cups were placed on the counter, and again Tweek fussed with the cash register until it spat out a total. Kyle passed his cash over to the barista, their fingers brushing as Tweek clamped his hand on the bills.

Gasping desperately for breath.

Someone was drowning. Murky brown water filled a young pair of lungs. Kyle almost gasped himself as he felt violently splashing water wet his clothes.

He jerked his hand away, but Tweek didn't seem to pay any mind to that. He shoved the bills in the register, dropped Kyle's change on the counter, and then simply said, "Thanks, come again."

Kyle was visibly shaken when his friends whisked him away to the opposite side of the café. Kenny was staring at him, which didn't really help matters. Somehow, it was still hard to breathe. Kyle slowly sucked in labored breaths to calm himself down, but the small vision he stole from Tweek's hand left his brain waterlogged.

"Wow, that was fucking weird," Cartman uttered as he slid into a booth. Butters took the seat beside him, and Kyle and Kenny settled in across the table. As usual.

"Yeah," Kenny agreed as he wrapped his cold hands around his paper coffee cup. "Tweek's always been like that, though- least 'for as long as I remember. Really awkward."

"Wait, you know him?" Kyle blurted.

"Tweek? Well... kinda. When I was a kid I spent a lot of time with Craig... uh, Tucker, you guys know. They kind of came as a package."

Actually... Kyle didn't know that. For some reason, it really bothered him when he realized there were things about Kenny he was simply never told about. Especially since Kyle already asked him about Craig, and all Kenny did was shrug.

"Yeah," Butters said as he pulled apart his doughnut. "Tweek really wasn't so weird until Craig was gone, though. He was actually really nice. I think he still is, y-you know, even though he's kind of... um... different."

The lot of them went quiet when they heard a sound from the counter. Tweek was taking off his apron with one hand, a coffee in the other, as he made his way towards the goths' table. Henrietta slid aside, and Tweek shakily took a seat beside her. This was intriguing for some reason.

"Hangs out with the goths. Man, I am not surprised," Eric muttered, and then reached in Butters's box for a brownie.

Kyle ignored the comment. He leaned forward into the table and asked quiet enough to where he was sure Tweek wouldn't hear, "Wait, what actually happened to Craig? They didn't ever find out, did they?"

"Kyle, you have lived here all your life how do you not know about Craig Tucker?" Cartman asked more loudly than Kyle was comfortable with. "They talked about him on t.v. for like a fucking year."

"Well... I don't know," Kyle couldn't come up with a good excuse. Honestly, he tried for the longest time to avoid it all together. It wasn't so hard when bad things happened to strangers, but Craig wasn't a stranger. He had art class with him. He saw him every day at school. The idea of a boy he'd known simply vanishing in the night never sat well with him. Especially after hearing Tweek's teary rants in class. Then again, Stan was the only one who ever knew that about Kyle.

He was the only one who knew everything. "Can't you guys just... kindly fill me in?" Kyle muttered.

"...They said he probably ran away," Kenny decided to explain as he played with his fingers. "But, like... he didn't just climb out his window in the middle of the night or anything. He was on his way home from Tweek's house- a five-minute walk. He just vanished."

Kyle already knew that much. Surely over five years they at least had a lead, even if it was just something small like a shirt or a shoe.

"And?" he coaxed.

"And... well, that's it. That's the end of the story."

Terrible Things

"Hey, Kyle!" A voice shouted happily. A pair of red sneakers squeaked to a stop before him, and Kyle smiled. It was the first day of eighth grade, and he hadn't seen any of the faces drifting by since the previous school year.

Well, the face grinning back at him was an exception.

He saw it every day of summer break.

"Hey, Stan," he greeted in return. "Ready for school?"

In a voice of pure excitement and elation, Stan blurted: "Fuck no!"

Kyle laughed, and the pair continued down the hallway side by side.

"You know, I have more classes with Cartman than with you this year," Kyle groaned. "Your first period is Math, right?"

"Yeah," Stan sighed in return. "How about you?"

"Astronomy."

"Isn't that a class for the high schoolers?"

Kyle shrugged. "I guess so, but they let me start early because of my GPA."

"Well look at you, Mr. Honor Roll's moving on up."

"Oh, here's room 112. That's Algebra 1," Kyle interrupted as he pointed at the white painted numbers over a black doorframe.

"I guess this is my stop then. Have fun learning about space or whatever it is you do in astronomy," Stan said while walking towards the door. "Oh! Wait a minute, I almost forgot."

Kyle tilted his head to the side in curiosity as he watched his best friend dig through his messenger bag. When Stan was through, he held his hand out.

"What is it?" Kyle asked with a dumb smile on his face. He reached his palm out under Stan's fist. When it opened, a small gift landed in Kyle's hand.

"A present. I have one, too," Stan said as he pulled up his sleeve to showcase a red and blue bracelet made of weaved yarn. "They're friendship bracelets."

"Did you make them?" Kyle asked as he slipped his onto his wrist. It was weaved with green and white, Kyle's favorite colors.

"Yeah, my sister taught me last night," Stan said proudly.

"Gay," Kyle snorted.

"Good, you should fucking love them then, you dick," Stan snickered with a lopsided smirk. "Hey, gotta go. I'll see you and the guys at lunch, yeah?"

"Yeah!"

Kyle never admitted it, but he was always nervous the first day back to school. His anxiety only grew when he watched the door to room 112 close behind his best friend's back. Sighing, he joined the stream of student's to look for his first class alone.

Anxiously, he reached down and rubbed the yarn around his wrist.

Tweek sat in the back of class. There was no one beside his desk and no one in front of it. It was almost as if he was being quarantined or exiled for his abnormality. Banned from the teenage experience. Though, in all honesty, he didn't appear to mind. He just sat there at his desk taking turns between jotting down notes and scribbling in a sketch book. Kyle never really noticed until then. Sure, he always knew Tweek was there, but, like the rest of the school, he never really bothered to stop and pay attention. Now, it's all he could think about.

Three English classes had passed since their odd meeting at the coffee shop. In those three days he and Butters pulled an all-nighter studying, Kenny and Eric swore not to talk to each other ever again for the fifth time, and another article appeared in the paper about the Shadowman and his holes. So, in other words, everything was just as it was before Kyle's terrifying reunion with Craig Tucker.

Everything except for his dreams.

His once pleasant sleeping had been invaded by vivid visions of murky water and collapsing lungs. Puss oozing eye sockets and shredded fingertips. He supposed that's what he got for leeching a vision off of such a spiritually toxic person as Tweek, but he didn't mean to.

Kyle's tired green eyes slid towards the lonely desk at the back of class. Tweek was there, as always, with mud-caked boots and a graphite stain on the outside of his right hand. He bit his chapped lip as he scribbled in that warn out sketchbook. Kyle only wondered what dark and disturbing things he would find in the personal drawings of the Shadowman.

He shook his head with a small sigh, and then averted his attention back to the front of the class. The teacher's soft spoken voice and airy movements didn't at all help her drowsy student keep his heavy eyes Eerily 61 open. His head slowly drooped down over his notes. The words on his notebook paper all ran together and faded in and out as he yawned.

"Kyle?... Kyle?"

He stirred at the sound of his name, his eyes cracking back open to discover an empty classroom. He jolted up from his desk. His cheek was wet and cold from where he'd managed to drool all over his class work and himself. His teacher, Mrs. Langly, was looking down at him with a worried expression.

"O-oh," he stammered while wiping at his cheek with his sleeve. "Shoot, I'm so sorry. What time is it?"

Mrs. Langly's frown melted into a humored quirk of the lips.

"Class only just ended," she assured him calmly.

"Crap, I didn't finish my notes," he spat. The honor roll student was careful to censor himself even as he was having a miniature meltdown.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Mrs. Langly said while tucking a black hair behind her ear. "I can give

you a copy of the overview when you come in tomorrow. Just be sure to get a lot of sleep tonight, okay?"

Relieved, Kyle quickly gathered up his belongings and shoved them in his binder. He supposed being teacher's pet did have its upsides.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Langly. It won't happen again, I promise."

All she did was offer an understanding nod before returning to her desk. Kyle squeezed his binder against his chest as he stumbled towards the hall. Stumbled, because he stepped on something rather thick and nearly went tumbling. He looked down at the binded stack of papers which were still under the sole of his shoe. He bent down and lifted the thing up off the floor. It had a shiny white cover adorned with the words "sketch diary". Under the neat font was a name sloppily written and underlined in red sharpie.

TWEEK TWEAK

Kyle felt a bubbling in his chest when he realized just what was in his hands. Tweek's sketchbook. His blood pumped about a thousand times quicker as excitement tightened in his chest. Mrs. Langly was giving him an odd look as he gawked at the thing, but didn't bother to question him when he tucked it against his binder and spilled out into the hall with the rest of the hustling students. He stopped at his locker, number 153, before switching out his materials for his next class. All his materials, anyway, aside from a peculiar sketchbook. He kept it hidden in his binder like contraband.

When he reached his next class, AP Biology, he sat as far away from his group as their shared table would allow. He wasn't too worried about unwanted conversation. Wendy Testaburger was assigned the seat beside him. She spent most of her time absorbed in her school work. Lately, she'd been so absorbed it was almost frightening. Kyle understood why.

She wouldn't be bothered with trying to speak with him today.

He unzipped his trapper keeper as Wendy exchanged notes with Annie, the third member of their class-assigned group. When the flap of his binder fell open the cover of Tweek's sketch book greeted him. His eyes darted around the rows of students as if he was about to commit a crime.

His fingers pressed against the front cover, and then he carefully flipped it open to the first page.

Grotesque images of mutilated corpses and depictions of the gory dead? No, that was a little off the mark.

Instead, Kyle was met face to face with an oddly cartoony depiction of a tiny boy in a sweater. There were black blotches where eyes should have been, but otherwise it was just... well... adorable. A happy little line made a smile between the black eyes, and some pudgy wisps of black made up the hair poking out from under an earflap hat.

The cute little creature seemed elated by his pretty sweater. Realizing that almost made Kyle laugh.

He flipped to the next page. Then the next, and then the next. They were all just pictures of sweaters. Some of them were modeled by the same chunky cartoon boy on the front page, and others weren't. There was one thing they all had in common, though: chicken scratched abbreviations and numbers written on the side of every page. Thanks to how much time Kyle spent with his mother, he knew exactly what they were.

Knitting patterns.

All the while Kyle was quietly pondering the horrors Tweek was creating on the blank paper of that book, he was only designing yarn sweaters. Kyle continued flipping casually through the pages. He observed sweater after colorful sweater, along with joyous doodles of bouquets and cartoon cats.

As he flipped and flipped his humored smile slowly melted into an uneasy line. There wasn't a single thing in that book that was going to tell him anything. The nightmares that had been plaguing him, the twisted being that hunted him down in the woods, and Tweek himself still remained blurred and confusing mysteries.

He was so devastated he didn't even hear the teacher greeting the class. He just went back to the first page and started skimming all over again, as if maybe he missed something. He came to a nerve-wracking conclusion by the time he'd again reached the end of Tweek's happy doodles. There was only one way to end the vivid visions in his dreams.

He had to talk to Tweek.

...

Tweek's boots thumped against worn wood as he paced the room. It was musty and old, just like the rest of the house he'd dubbed his home away from home.

Not that he wanted to.

There was a large piece of paper tacked over the crumpled, floral wallpaper. A map of Stark's Pond. It hung there for as long as he inhabited that place. Over time its once crisp, white image had been scribbled over and written on in various types of markers and pens. Big circles and x's, mostly. They marked the holes he'd dug, and the holes he went back and dug deeper. He stared wide-eyed as he gnawed at his thumbnail.

What was he missing? He skimmed over the waterfront and the woods, its borders and landmarks scribbled in like Tweek's x's and o's. Where? Where? WHERE?

It was only about four o'clock. He had all day to figure out his next excavation site, but all day was not long enough. Weeks and months were not long enough. Five years was not long enough. Five fucking years digging and he still hadn't found it. There were so many times he nearly tossed his shovel in a dumpster. One of those times he ended up wreaking like trash.

His boots changed direction, and he rubbed his sleeve against the dirty glass of a window. He peered down from the second story at the yard below. Craig was there, crawling slowly through the grass. Tweek's lip quirked up when he noticed a small blond head peek around the trunk of a tree. Craig noticed, too, and quickly scurried along the ground to attempt to jump on the apparition before it could stumble away.

Despite how much it took out of Tweek to be at the pond, it was always a breath of fresh air to see Craig get to play with other children. Though he was never quite sure exactly what it was they played.

Craig, on the other hand, knew every rule of the game. He may have been completely blind, but he had other means of finding the kids during their many hide and seek adventures. Usually, he was the one to seek. The game never ended when he was the one to hide.

Craig's fingers scraped along the bark of a tree before he pounced. He was sure he'd land on the other boy- he could hear soft breathing nearby. However, his hands and knees landed painfully

against the exposed roots of the tree. Confused, Craig turned his head as if he could see if he just tried hard enough. He could hear someone nearby, feel the faint vibrations of feet through the dirt and roots. They felt like the vibrations he used to feel through the headboard. He knew what was coming, and that there was no escape.

He lifted his head up, but it was jerked back down when the boy he'd originally been tracking jumped playfully on his back. A pair of arms wrapped loosely around his neck, and Craig immediately screamed. Not the howl of joyful play he usually let out, but a yelp that truly sounded terrified.

The boy was knocked off Craig's back as the gory creature thrashed across the ground. He realized what he was doing, but was powerless to stop it. Once it began, it wouldn't stop until it was done with him.

Tweek was still inside, unaware of the ongoing battle Craig was fighting. He marked on his paper and sighed to himself. It was then heard a rattle at the window. He lifted his head up from his work and waited a moment until the glass in the window panes began to vibrate. He heard the collective murmur of distressed voices and ran to the window. The children were standing in a circle in the back yard. He watched through the grimy glass with squinted eyes as they joined hands. A tiny body was in the middle, thrashing across the grass.

Tweek called it a healing circle because that's exactly what it was. The children would make such a circle under one circumstance: Craig was on the edge of a mental breakdown.

"Shit," Tweek hissed before turning and running throughout the house. He could never resist the urge to run to Craig's rescue, even when he knew there was nothing he could do. He ran out into the yard, nearly tripping over his own feet as they pumped underneath him.

The children were singing, but their happy sounds were not soothing Craig as they always had before. Tweek stopped only feet away from their playful circle. They all slowly spun around and around, giggling and cooing. Singing and playing. Tweek watched with hitched breath as Craig struggled to stand. He was trying so hard to focus on the children's voices, but the groan of springs echoed much louder.

They couldn't save him this time.

He felt big hands all over him. Warm, intrusive hands that scraped at his skin raw with every touch. He felt heavy breath seeping stench into his neck. His jaw hung open as if he could beg for mercy, but his mouth was full of jagged teeth. The children's ritual that always saved Craig from reliving his torment was failing. He couldn't hear their voices anymore. All he felt was the breath in his ear. All he heard was a low, raspy whisper.

The children all scattered in opposite directions when Craig's panic gave way to violence. Tweek watched on in horror as little Craig lurched and tried to escape. Blind, he slammed headfirst into the trunk of a tree. His skull smashed against the resilient wood, but that disgusting puffing was still heaving into his flesh.

"It's not real, Craig!" Tweek tried to convince the boy as he fought to escape an attacker that simply wasn't there.

Craig was crying. Loud. Tweek could hardly stand the sound.

"It's okay!" Tweek said as he quickly rushed to the other's aid. Rather than reply, Craig jerked back and bashed his head against the bark.

"S-stop!" Tweek demanded as he tried to scoop the boy up in his arms. He was met with an ear busting screech. It sounded pained, as if each of his touches were searing Craig's skin. Alarmed, Tweek let Craig fall back onto the ground where he twisted and kicked at an unseen force.

"MAKE IT STOP," Craig wretched in a voice that didn't belong to him, "I CANT BREATHE."

"KILL ME."

Tweek couldn't fucking take it anymore. Craig never had an attack that bad, and Tweek realized he was absolutely powerless. All he could do was stand and watch as Craig was forced to endure his defilement over again. Tweek fell to his knees as Craig again rammed his skull against the tree. He had to do something. He at least had to try.

"Twinkle, Twinkle, little star," Tweek sang through his wavering, cracking voice. "How I wonder what you are."

The words did nothing to spare Craig from his torment. All they did was meld miserably with the little ghost's booming pleas for mercy.

"Up above the world so h-high... Like a diamond in the sky."

It didn't help, but Tweek couldn't stop. He just kept mimicking the children's song.

"When the blazing sun is gone. When the nothing shines upon."

Craig's bone snapping contortions slowed. His neck snapped around with a crack. Two red, gushing holes stared back at Tweek. A lump formed in the middle of Tweek's throat at the grotesque sight, but his trembling lips continued on. "Then you show your little l-light. Twinkle, twinkle, all the night." Craig's sobbing returned to him as his twisted mess of limbs straightened themselves out. He scrambled across the ground on his bloody hands and knees, right into Tweek's open arms. The choked and miserable cries didn't stop, but Craig's shredded fingers were back to stroking Tweek's face. The usually black, tar lined insides of Craig's eye sockets were red and meaty. Fleishy strands hung from the holes as if they'd only just been carved out of his head. Streaks of fresh blood made lines down his white skin, but it wouldn't stop gushing from the inside of his legs.

"I'm just gonna wipe you off, is that okay?" Tweek said. He pulled off his jacket, being careful not to startle the small boy still whimpering near his face. He bundled up the cloth and gently brought it to Craig's cheeks. The sobbing stopped when the little boy felt the familiar smelling cloth, though Tweek was too shaken to smile this time.

Once the gore had been wiped away from Craig's face, Tweek brought the crimson stained cloth to the boy's blood streaked and trembling thighs. The moment the jacket pressed against his fragile skin the boy broke back out into heartbreaking sobs. His small hands grabbed Tweek's wrist, and he shook his head hard - begging for it to stop.

"No, no. I- I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Tweek cried out as he tossed the jacket aside. His cheeks were streaked wet with tears, though he was too absorbed in the sound of Craig's screaming to notice. He carefully pulled the broken boy into his lap, where he loosely held him against his chest and rocked back and forth.

"We're okay now," Tweek promised while nodding his head.

Craig's tiny fingers clutched onto the front of Tweek's shirt. Fresh blood again overflowed from where he was most afraid of being touched. It left grisly streams of red slathered across his legs and dirty white shirt. It spilled all over Tweek, too, as he held the boy against his chest. He didn't

care. He just stayed there, rocking back and forth while rubbing Craig's back.

"We're okay. We're fine. Nobody can hurt you now."

...

Class had been over for a couple hours by the time Kyle got around to going to Tweek's house. Or, at least, what he hoped was still Tweek's house. He only remembered Kenny casually mentioning it once as they drove by in middle school, so he hoped he wasn't going to end up knocking on a stranger's door.

His sneakers thumped against wood as he stepped up onto a porch. Wind chimes sang pleasant songs as they were caught in a light breeze. They twinkled over his head. The house seemed nice enough. The yard was well trimmed and there was a colorful patio set arranged on the porch. Trim and neat, like most all of the houses on that block.

He tugged the straps of his backpack. The sketchbook was inside along with a few other of his personal belongings. He sucked in a steadying breath, and then walked up to the wooden door. There was a stained glass window nestled into the oak, though he couldn't see through it. He tapped his knuckles against the door, then waited with a lump in his throat.

The door came open so soon Kyle jumped. There was a woman on the other side. Her hair was cut into a short bob, and her blue eyes gazed down pleasantly at Kyle. He recognized her immediately: Mrs. Tweek, the woman who owns the coffee shop with her husband.

"Oh!" She said with a small smile. "Kyle, right? The little Broflovski boy. Always gets two coffees with two scoops of vanilla creamer each. Yes, I remember."

Kyle could only nod his head politely as he squeezed on the straps of his backpack. This was indeed Tweek's house.

"So, what can I do for you, young man?"

"Oh, yeah," he uttered rather awkwardly while fidgeting with the edge of his jacket. "Is Tweek home?"

The dark haired woman behind the door looked down at him with a lost expression.

"Tweek?" She questioned as if maybe she didn't hear him right.

"Um... yeah! I need to talk to him about one of our classes." Kyle didn't like lying, but if he told her about the sketchbook she'd probably just suggest he leave it with her. He couldn't lose his only ticket to talking to Tweek. It would be easier if he had an excuse to start a conversation.

"Oh! He's not home right now. I think he went on a walk," Mrs. Tweek replied with a nod. "He likes to wander off and have time for himself, you know? I can take a message for him if you'd like."

"Ah, that's fine. Just tell him I stopped by, I guess," he replied. "Thank you!"

"Well, of course! Anytime!" she said before the decorated door creaked closed.

Well, there went that idea. Tweek wasn't home, but Kyle wasn't the kind to give up so easily. He stepped off the Tweek's porch making a mental list of all the places Tweek might be. Not that he really had any idea. When he stopped to think about it, he hadn't ever noticed seeing Tweek out

and about around town. Not that he could remember, anyway.

First, he checked the park. Then the grocery store. Then the gas station. Then the coffee shop. Having no luck, he took an uneasy stroll down one of South Park's few streets. He was debating with himself whether or not he should follow it to the end. There was one place left on his mental checklist. He put it at the bottom for a reason, and that reason was because he did not want to go back.

Of course while walking the streets he made sure not to peek up at certain houses. It was easy to get discouraged and want to go home when he'd see figures watching him from windows. It was just a part of his gift. He saw them when they wanted to be seen, whether he liked it or not. The only way to avoid it was well... to not look.

The church came into view as he nervously made his way towards the pond. It stood beautifully amongst tall green pine trees, though the sidewalk had been cracking and crumbling over time. The cement was so broken up and uneven he had to step up and down ajar hunks of sidewalk. The sky was changing colors as the sun made its sleepy decent into the mountains, and Kyle was quickly reconsidering. He bit down on his lip when he saw the glistening blue water in the distance. Air got harder to suck in the closer he got. The power that place held was overwhelming. He couldn't help but feel like bugs were skittering around beneath his flesh. He ran his fingernails over his arm for a moment, and then squeezed his yarn bracelet.

"Okay," he said to himself as he came to the gravel parking lot. "We aren't going in the woods. So don't be scared. We're just... peeking at the pond, then we're gonna run back home. Yeah..."

He passed a trash can as he stepped onto the path that lead down to the water's edge. His eyes scanned the grassy landscape for any sign of life. Much to his shock, there were people there. In the distance there was a wooden bench planted along the dirt path. A tall figure was slouched forward on said bench. As Kyle walked closer he could make out a small pair of bare legs, like someone was sitting in its lap.

He wasn't sure if it was Tweek, but he figured he'd be able to tell once he was close enough. A chilly breeze wafted over him from the pond. He shivered as the water ripple and dance. When he glanced back at the bench, he only saw a blond person with a black jacket draped over his lap. No bare legs. No little person.

He'd found who he was looking for.

"Hello," Kyle offered quietly, which made the blond jump. He whirled around to find the redhead there clutching a sketchbook to his chest.

"Sorry! I didn't want to scare you! I just... this is yours."

He held the book out for Tweek to take, but the blond boy just stared dumbly at it. It was almost as if he was sure it was some kind of trap. Oh, and he was.

"You dropped it in English class, I've been trying to return it all day," Kyle said with a small, but friendly smile.

Not impressed by Kyle's sweetness, Tweek reached up and snatched the book away. He set it in his lap, and the two remained quiet as he skimmed through the sweater-covered pages. Kyle didn't like the implications of it. Still, he didn't say a word until Tweek made it to the blank pages.

"See, just like you left it," Kyle chimed as if to reaffirm his innocence.

Tweek nodded slightly, and then gazed back up at the other boy. "What else do you want?"

"Huh?" Kyle muttered.

"You're still standing here, so there must be something else," Tweek snapped almost bitterly.

Kyle's cheeks tinted an annoyed red at the harshness of Tweek's tone. He was hoping for a thank you at least, but it was obvious Tweek wasn't the kind of person who threw out such niceties. He'd spent his entire day looking for that asshole- for answers! Still, leaving a bad taste in the mouth of the person keeping them probably wasn't the best way to get them.

"I, um... no," Kyle lied. "No, that's all."

He turned and stiffly took off in the opposite direction. He didn't know what he expected, really. Such a social recluse surely wasn't going to crack open and spill out all his secrets just because Kyle returned a book. It was then, as he was festering in his doubts, he heard the sound of footsteps thumping in the dirt. Kyle stopped and turned around, where he found Tweek tailing behind him at a distance.

"What are you doing?" Kyle asked while shaking his head. His exasperation was a little too obvious.

"...I don't let people walk home alone anymore," Tweek uttered through clenched teeth. "Not when it's getting dark."

Kyle was awestruck for a moment, but ultimately ended up nodding slowly in consent. The odd pair walked through the appending night, though Tweek remained lingering quietly in the background. Kyle had to admit how creepy it was being followed by the tall, hooded figure. Neither spoke a single word until they'd already awkwardly shuffled past the lights of the church.

"I hope you don't get mad, but I peeked in your sketchbook," Kyle finally confessed to break the silence between him and his new shadow. "I liked all your sweaters, do you actually make them?"

Tweek jerked his head in an awkward nod. He wasn't really used to strangers trying to start up idle chit chat. Not that Kyle was exactly a stranger, but he might as well been. Tweek rubbed his aching ribs and let out a shaky sigh. They were hurting and tight, like his lungs puffed up like balloons.

"I knit sometimes- it's stupid," Tweek finally admitted. Stupid as in it was something the other kids didn't do. Then again, the other kids didn't have a shivering little Craig to keep warm, either.

"I don't think it's stupid," Kyle commented. "I used to knit sometimes. My mom really loves doing it."

Again, Tweek only stiffly nodded. Kyle contemplated a moment how to bring up all the questions he had. He wasn't exactly sure how to ask them.

"So, why were you hanging around the pond so late at night?" Kyle questioned while staring at the muck on Tweek's boots. The hooded blond was finally walking alongside him.

Again, Tweek preferred to reply without words. A stiff shrug was about all he could muster. He was worn out, tired, and his heart was all withered up and sad.

"Well, you must be pretty brave to hang out around there by yourself!" Kyle concluded as the sound of their footsteps shuffled beneath them. "Especially with the Shadowman."

Suddenly, the streetlamps flickered to life above them, making Kyle jump a little. They let out a creepy buzzing than hummed through the darkening air.

Tweek would not reply to Kyle. The subject understandably put his already sore heart in overdrive. As they stepped out from under the safety of a streetlamp Tweek took in Kyle's form in the darkness. His hands went clammy. Kyle was there the night fatass and his friends chased him through the woods. Oh, fucking Jesus. What if it was all a trap? What if this was another fucking attempt at snatching him?

"You don't talk much, do you?" Kyle asked quietly.

"Everyone's stupid," Tweek suddenly said. "Shadowman this. Shadowman that. It's all so dumb."

"Well... I guess it'd be a little ridiculous if what they say is true," Kyle said while tapping his chin with his pointer finger. "Murderous ghosts trying to hide bodies."

"It's not true," Tweek said through a tight jaw. There was no point being subtle. He already made up his mind that Kyle was about to ambush him. He was so sure Cartman and the others were hiding around every corner that he flinched each time they passed the side of a house, expecting to get pounced on.

Kyle shifted his gaze up to the tall teen beside him. After a moment of consideration, he timidly asked: "Then... what is the truth?"

They both went silent as they walked under streetlights. Tweek was so ready to start running. He wanted to so badly, but the last time he let someone slip away into the dark of night alone...

"I don't know," Tweek muttered the lie. They were all going to jump him and probably beat the shit out of him. Then turn him into the cops and come to his cell just so they could throw stuff at him from between the bars. Like some monkey in a zoo. Oh, Jesus. The least he could do was plead his case. "Maybe... maybe he's a good guy, you know? M-maybe he's trying to do the opposite of what everyone always says."

"Like what, instead of trying to hide body parts he's trying to find them?..." The sentence almost began as a joke, at least until he reached the punch line. Kyle stopped in his tracks beneath another streetlight, which made Tweek do the same.

"That's... that's why you're out there digging holes, isn't it?" he asked with knit brows.

Tweek looked back with wide eyes. His mouth fell open a little as if he wanted to argue, but none of the petrified words he could think of would push past the barrier of his lips.

"No one would listen to you about Craig, so you've been going out there all this time to find him on your own."

Tweek took a step back. His round, blue eyes wavered and flicked as if he was searching for an escape. He was awestruck. The gears in his head all fell loose and were rattling around in his brain. Who was this Kyle character? How the fuck could he figure Tweek out so easily?

"What? Me?" Tweek blurted while stepping out of the buzzing light of the lamppost they wandered under.

"I haven't told anyone," Kyle promised before slowly nodding his head. "I'm the only one who saw your face."

Boom, Tweek was fucking right. The one time he was hoping to be wrong.

"Oh, god. Jesus. W-what do you want? I don't have a whole lot for you to take- what do you want with me?!"

"Wow! No, no, I'm not trying to blackmail you!" Kyle said with his arms shooting up in surrender. "I just... I don't know, I just wanted to talk."

"Why?! Are you bugged? Recording all this for one of those news articles or something?!" Tweek nearly screamed in a frightened voice. "You can't- you can't turn me in, you can't! I haven't found him yet!"

"I'm not bugged, and I'm not going to turn you in. I wouldn't spend all day searching for you just so I could escort you to a police station," Kyle retorted as he continued on his way home. He tread off the sidewalk and crossed the street. Perplexed, Tweek wafted after him.

"Then why?" Tweek persisted.

Kyle looked down at his feet. He literally had Tweek right where he wanted him. All he had to do was spill the beans about his gift. 'Cause I see dead people, and I wanna know why your precious Craig tried to rip my face off, was a good way to start. Or, he could go more subtle with a simple: I get psychic visions when I touch things, and I can't even sleep since you grabbed my hand.

There were a thousand ways he could have said it, but when he was there, side by side with the legendary Shadowman, he couldn't even open his mouth. He rubbed his temples and exhaled.

"I guess I was just curious about you."

The suspicious look Tweek gave him was more than enough to prove he didn't believe Kyle. Not for a moment.

Kyle rubbed his yarn bracelet with his thumb as he saw his house tucked alongside the others on his sleepy street.

"And I... I never knew anyone who could see them like I can."

"You see dead people, too, yeah sure," Tweek laughed in disbelief. Kyle was almost shocked at first to hear such utter doubt, at least until he remembered every 'psychic' he'd ever seen on a T.V. show.

People loved to pretend.

"Craig's eyes are ripped out of his head," Kyle said as he nodded away the chilling memory.

Tweek gawked at the other with eyes as big as the moon rising overhead, but that's where that conversation seized. They'd finally reached Kyle's house.

Tweek stood on the sidewalk as Kyle stepped up onto his front stoop. He took in a heavy breath before turning back to look at the person behind him. Those icy blue eyes were still locked onto Kyle. The skin around it was pale, giving away just how chilled to the bone Tweek had become.

Aside from himself, there was no one.

No one in his life who had ever seen Craig. He was both astonished and terrified.

Kyle nibbled on his bottom lip a moment.

"Maybe... we can meet up again sometime and talk?" he suggested. "You don't have to be so alone all the time, you know."

Immediately, Tweek shook his head no.

"I don't talk," he nearly hissed. "I don't need friends."

Kyle looked down at his shoes. That was it for tonight. The door closed behind him, and Tweek was left staring at the pristine, polished wood.

Dig Deep

There were so many moments in life Tweek wished he could relive.

If he had that second chance, he could have conquered the demons infesting his torn mind and set everything right again. He always felt that way; since the moment Craig vanished from the sidewalk. After all, all it would have taken to spare Craig from his unending misery would have been a few simple words. A show of concern; a casual suggestion. If only he walked Craig home. If only he insisted on a sleep over. That was all he had to do.

He didn't know Craig was one sentence away from salvation. So, instead of all those things he could have done, all he did was say goodbye. A single breath was all Tweek needed to sacrifice to save Craig's life, but he found out a day too late.

The only thing that distanced him from Craig's salvation was time. Sadly, Tweek did not have a time machine. All he had were his words. Words, it seemed, nobody wanted to hear. Nobody including his best childhood friends, Token and Clyde.

They had been together for as long as Tweek could recall. It was always the four of them, including Craig. They were an impenetrable force; an unshakable alliance of trust and true loyalty. Through hell and high water their four man show ruled the world with no questions asked. So, naturally, Tweek confided in his best friends.

He told them about the vivid visions in his dreams, the arrival of their mangled friend, and how urgent it was for someone to find him. It was painfully obvious they didn't believe a word Tweek spoke, but they listened. They listened because they loved him. Despite all the bullies and school councilor visits he'd accumulated in those few months, they still loved him.

At least that's what he thought until one miserable day in seventh grade.

That morning he was scuttling towards Clyde's locker with his head down. He and Craig met up with his friends there every day before class started. That didn't change after Craig's death. Tweek held his books tightly against his chest as he approached his friends. He could see Clyde's jersey jacket through the crowd; Token's purple hoodie, too.

However, there was something different about that morning. There was a guy at Clyde's locker. It was a new kid Tweek barely recognized. The kid's name and face eventually was lost to time, seeing as how he only went to their school for a year of junior high.

Anxious, Tweek stood behind Token and waited for the unwelcome intruder to leave.

"It's this Sunday. I'm pretty much inviting everybody, so feel free to spread it around," The kid said as he nodded his head.

"We can totally come, yeah!" Clyde replied excitedly to the foreign face.

"Alright, cool!" the other rejoiced. "Oh, but... don't you hang around with that... psychotic kid? The one who thinks he sees dead people or something? Let's... kinda forget to tell him about it, alright?"

The look on Tweek's face must have been heartbreaking.

"What? You mean Tweek?" Token asked with his brows furrowed. It almost seemed like he was

going to defend his friend, but another voice chimed in before he could speak.

"You're kidding me, right? I wouldn't worry. That freak just kinda hangs around us for some reason. We just haven't had the heart to tell him to leave us alone, yet."

Tweek could practically feel his heart crush between the teeth of those hurtful words; Clyde's hurtful words.

"Alright, cool!" said the unnamed boy that, to Tweek, was never worth remembering. "See you then!"

As the kid walked away, Token gave Clyde a scornful look.

"Oh, come on!" Clyde whined before turning around to close his locker. "It's not like Tweek's gonna-"

He stopped. A familiar face stared back at him from around Token's arm. The look Tweek was wearing said it all. Clyde's cheeks drained of color. He'd been caught, and he knew there was no smoothing it over. Token watched in silent shock as his friends stared blankly at one another.

Tweek finally broke the perturbed silence with, "Y... you think I'm a freak?"

"Well..." Clyde looked into his locker as he thought about what he should say. "I mean, maybe freak was a little harsh, but..."

"But what?" Tweek demanded. His round eyes brimmed faintly with bitter water.

Clyde sighed, and then ran a hand through his brown hair. He always did that right before he was about to come out with something.

"I'm just tired," he admitted while shaking his head. "I'm tired of all the stuff you say and all the things you do. It's like everything's gotta be so complicated. It was bearable before, but nobody even wants to sit with us anymore because all you ever do is make up stuff about Craig."

Tweek shook his head. Hard.

"Wh- but I'm not making it up!"

Finally, all the frustration Clyde had been harboring all that time came exploding out of him. He truly was so tired, and he just couldn't listen to all the bullshit anymore.

"Stop lying, Tweek! You don't know what happened to Craig – Nobody does!"

"Y-yes I do!" Tweek insisted, putting a heavy weight on each word he spat out of his mouth. "He told me! He showed it to me when I was asleep!"

"Do you even listen to yourself? You don't see ghosts, Tweek. They aren't real! Craig was an actual person -your friend - who fucking disappeared. Do you have any idea how - how – disrespectful it is to use him as some character for your little ghost stories?!"

Tweek was so taken aback by what his friend was saying he didn't know how to respond. His hands were shaking violently and it felt like his heart was a kettle drum Clyde was beating on. He looked to Token, who was always the peace maker when things went awry. All Token did was look down at his feet with a damning expression.

He agreed with Clyde.

"What? n-no! It's not... It's not like that!"

By that point, hallway traffic stopped almost completely. Clyde and Tweek were so absorbed in their anger and confusion that they didn't notice the silence hidden under their screaming.

"Sure it's not! Just like that man in the attic, right? You think saying all these crazy things will make you seem cool? Well, it fucking doesn't! It makes you look like a freak!"

There it was again; that word that left Tweek's eyes stinging and his mouth dry. FREAK.

"You think I would use losing Craig as some kind of leverage for a lie? He was my best friend. I can't run away from him like you can! I can't ever forget him like you can!" Tweek spat, his face dangerously close to Clyde's.

Suddenly, there was a low rumble of chanting that seeped between the warring friends. It came from their crowd of peers. 'Fight!' They chimed mindlessly, 'Fight!'

"Shut up! Just shut up! The only thing you ever cared about was being the center of attention! You even had to go and make what happened to Craig all about you! You're a leech- a LEECH!"

"That's not true!" Tweek protested through budding tears. He fisted the front of Clyde's jersey jacket in his trembling hands, begging to be believed or understood. "All I want is somebody to make him stop hurting! Please, Clyde! Please believe me!"

That was the last straw for Clyde. The chants from the crowd became more and more bloodthirsty. They wanted a show, and Tweek's fists were clutching the front of his jacket. He grabbed Tweek's wrists and shoved him away. Harder than he'd meant to. Tweek stumbled back and painfully rammed his shoulder into a locker. The sound reverberated through the metal just like Craig's low hissing reverberated through Tweek's skull.

The students surrounding them let out startled screams as lights above Clyde flickered and cracked before bursting with an ear shattering pop. For a short moment everyone was silent with shock, but it wasn't over. Clyde took a step back in surprise, and every locker in the hallway that hung open was violently slammed closed by an unseen force. Loose papers flew and the lights went haywire. Tweek was just as afraid as everyone else who witnessed the violent outburst. His fear only grew as thick black goo dripped from the ceiling and onto his shirt. He looked up to a disgusting sight. Craig was latched onto the ceiling above him.

Tweek realized no one else saw him. Everyone was looking at Tweek with horrified expressions rather than the ghost hanging above their heads.

That was the day that turned Tweek's life into a solitary hell.

That was the day their fear began.

He wobbled to his feet. As he stood, everyone near him scrambled away. They were gawking at him as if he was a monster. As if he was a four-eyed, bearded lady who escaped from the freak show. Tweek was the one who blew the light. He's the one who slammed all the locker doors, and he did it without so much as lifting a finger.

"How the hell did you do that?" Clyde finally spat. He was horrified, just like all the other speechless students eyeballing Tweek. He was so scared that the tears brimming in the edges of his eyes spilled over.

"It wasn't me!" Tweek screamed as he stumbled back. He didn't try to explain himself. He was tired

of explaining. He was tired of just saying words and not being heard. They would never listen to him. They would never accept him.

Not even Token and Clyde.

He ran down the hall. The crowd of fearful kids split open right down the middle as he ran through them. No one wanted to be the one he bumped into. For all they knew, he could splatter them across their lockers with as much as a nod of his head.

He was still racing down the locker-lined hallways when the attendance bell rang. He hardly noticed the sound. He was too petrified by the walls closing in on him. He felt like he was being asphyxiated.

Clyde. Clyde of all people. 'Betrayed' didn't even begin to describe his anguish. He didn't have a single soul left to share his pain with. What was he going to do now? How was he going to sit in his classes without prying stares?... How could he survive all alone?

These questions were too much for the thirteen year old to take. He ran through the then-empty halls until he came across a big red sign. It was fixed over the frame of a metal door, glowing bright with deliverance. EXIT, it read in blocky letters. Without a second thought he pushed through it. He was met with fresh air. He breathed it in like an alcoholic sips on a bottle, but his insides still felt rotten. He staggered across the cement of a sidewalk before tripping over his own foot. A loud thump reverberated through that fresh air as he landed, but it didn't hurt. Or it hurt like a bitch and he was too busy flooding the sidewalk with his tears to care.

His chest heaved as he sat up. Choked sobs fell from his mouth when he saw a figure standing before him. Wearing nothing but an oversized shirt slathered with grime, Craig stared down at Tweek. His skin was nearly paper white, save for the red splotches at his joints.

"This is all your fault!" Tweek screamed. "T-they all think I did that! They're- They're all scared of us now, Craig! No one is ever gonna listen to us. Never!"

Craig didn't respond. He just stood there in a fixed place in time. Staring into nothingness with his eyeless sockets. Tweek ground his teeth together.

"Not even Token and Clyde will help us now," he whimpered. "Why did you have to go and get killed in the first place, you- you stupid ghost?! Say something!"

Craig's brows wrinkled together. His mouth opened and closed with a pattern of speech Tweek couldn't hear. Tweek's fingers pressed into cement as he watched Craig struggle. Finally a tiny noise slipped from between the cracks of Craig's white lips. It didn't really sound like much of anything. A small, jumbled murmur was all he could do, but he was trying.

He was trying so hard.

And again, Tweek's heart shattered.

"I'm sorry..." he muttered quietly to the phantom still opening and closing its lips. He wiped his wet cheeks with the back of his hands. "You were... just trying to protect me."

Craig's mouth closed.

Token and Clyde may have left him broken and empty just like everyone else, but at least he still had Craig. Or, at the very least, the shell he left behind.

"Just... don't ever, ever do that again," Tweek ordered as gently as he could manage.

Craig didn't reply. Not even with a nod. Still, Tweek somehow knew he understood.

...

When Tweek couldn't see Craig, his chest ached.

Tweek walked alone through the streets on his way home from dropping off Kyle. He couldn't hear Craig's footsteps behind him. He couldn't see his little figure walking alongside him. He still felt his presence. He was there, somewhere, though Tweek couldn't see him.

He sucked in a sharp breath, which only caused more tension in his already aching chest. It wasn't pain he felt, not really. It was more like a heavy pressure. It was almost as if he grew an extra lung he didn't quite have room for.

The pressure always came when Craig was away.

When he stepped into the front door of his house he came across a sight he didn't think much of. His parents sat on the living room couch, sleeping. He normally didn't come home until the early hours of the morning. By then, his parents finally gave up waiting for him to come home.

Who could blame them for waiting up, really? They, like every family on the block, had a deep seeded fear that their child could be the next to vanish. However, Tweek gave his parents extra reason to be scared for him. He snuck out, and a lot. Not only did he like to disappear in the midst of the night without so much as a goodbye, but he'd never tell the truth about where he'd been.

They'd had many stern talks with him, but no amount of talking could keep the Shadowman away from Stark's Pond.

Tweek bunched his jacket up against his chest and made his way towards the stairs. He was careful to be quiet. Though this was a rare night he was at home when they wanted him to be, he'd rather escape another concerned lecture.

"You're home," he heard a groggy voice greet from behind him. He turned with a jolt to find his father looking up at him from the couch. His mother, however, still sat fast asleep beside him.

"Oh... yeah," Tweek uttered a little awkwardly while rigging his jacket in his hands.

"I mean, you're actually at home by nine," Richard clarified with an air of awe to his voice.

"Ah, you know," Tweek mumbled to himself. "Decided to roam the streets and sell all my drugs early today."

Richard rolled his eyes. "Ha ha, very funny."

Tweek seemed to think so, considering his laughter. He waved a lazy hand goodbye. Before he could put his foot on the first step his father stopped him with more unwanted conversation.

"Hey, Tweek," Richard uttered while leaning forward. "Do you think it'd be alright if I had a word with you real quick?"

Tweek quirked his head. He already knew where this was going. He'd had about a thousand 'interventions' since Craig came back to him a mangled mess. Sometimes they'd try to get him to talk about it. Other times they'd want to know where it was he spent all his time at night. Then, on

more recent occasions, they'd ask if he was on drugs.

Which, to be fair, there were nights he skipped the pond and went to Henrietta's. The goths were gracious with their weed, and Tweek was guilty of indulging when he was too stressed. That night was different from all the rest, though. Instead of bombarding Tweek with a web of confusing questions and concerned allegations, his father calmly stood from his seat and motioned for Tweek to follow him. With a defeated sigh, Tweek did so.

Richard led him into the kitchen and away from his sleeping mother, where they could talk without waking her. Richard took a seat at the table and nodded his head towards the chair across from him.

"Go on, son. This isn't about your late nights out. Sit."

The chair's legs groaned against the floor as Tweek pulled it out and sat down. He anxiously rubbed his muddy boots together. If it wasn't about his sneaking out, it could only be about two other things. He didn't feel like talking about either.

"Now, I know me and your mother talked to you plenty before about what you go through," Richard began as he tapped his fingers along the top of the table. Tweek immediately frowned. "But... I felt like you and I should talk. Man to man."

The kitchen clock ticked a somber tune as Tweek kept his eyes down on the tabletop. It had bright splotches of yellow running across the wood. They were reflections of the ceiling lamp that shined above them.

He didn't want to look up because he already knew what kind of face his father would be wearing.

"I know you're living your own life, and as long as you aren't getting into trouble I don't mind letting you live it... but maybe- maybe you should focus on the people in your life. The living people."

Tweek looked up and swallowed hard. Craig had always been a bit of a taboo subject, considering the very mention of him brought up the question of their only son's sanity. He was so sure they talked about locking him up in a loony bin at least once, if not twice daily.

"You don't have friends, you don't talk to me and your mother. It's like this thing you've got going on is just... well, destroying your life. It has been for a very long time."

"Dad... I know how much you guys love me," Tweek began slowly. "Trust me. I know, but we've talked so much over the years I don't know what to say anymore."

"Please, just talk to me," Richard begged from across the table. "I won't judge you. I won't pick at you. Tweek, I'm your father and I just... I need to help my son. Please."

The tightness in Tweek's ribs only grew. He couldn't see Craig, but he could hear angry breath in the shell of his ear.

Craig, chill out. We talked about this.

"You won't believe me. I don't expect anyone to. I just need you to understand that it isn't going away. Maybe not ever... Yeah, it hurts and all that fun stuff, but it's a punishment I need to take."

"Punishment?" Richard asked softly. His eyes changed again. They seemed softer, half-lidded as he gazed at his only child. "Tweek... you don't need punishment. What happened to Craig is not your

fault."

Tweek felt like he'd just swallowed a mouthful of cold water. His bottom lip quivered without his consent, but he remained emotionless otherwise.

Richard leaned forward over the table. That worried look returned to him. "You were just a little boy," he said as if he was begging Tweek to believe him. "There wasn't anything you could have done."

Tweek swallowed down the tension in his throat. He didn't agree. He didn't believe it. A few simple words were all Tweek needed, and he didn't say them.

He didn't say them.

"Craig is with me now," Tweek uttered with a weak nod. "Whether or not it was my fault doesn't matter. He needs me."

Tweek rubbed his aching ribs with a grimace. "Can I please go to my room now?"

Richard leaned back in his chair. A huff of breath escaped from his nostrils before he said, "Okay. Okay. Just... don't forget you can talk to me, okay? About Craig, about anything. Me and your mother both."

Tweek nodded his head, but didn't do much else but idle in his chair and clutch his ribs.

"You okay?" Richard asked as he watched Tweek run his hands over his chest with a pained expression on his face.

"Yeah, just my chest."

"If your ribs are hurting we need to take you back to the doctor," his father replied.

"Why? So they can tell us nothing's wrong with me again?" Tweek reasoned. "It'll pass, always does."

There were no more words exchanged as Tweek stood from the table. Again, the legs of his chair cried out against the floor. He made his way out of the kitchen and to his room as quickly as he could manage. As he ascended the staircase, the tension in his chest slowly subsided.

Craig was standing in the middle of the hallway. His head was down. The dirty earflaps of his blue hat hid the unpleasant view of his distorted face. Tweek didn't think much of it as his bedroom door slowly creaked open on its own. The lambent image of the little boy drifted into the open door, and Tweek followed.

Relieved of the pinching in his torso, he gladly kicked off his boots by his bed. Craig was on the floor. His arms and legs bent and jerked awkwardly as he crawled underneath the bedframe. Tweek politely waited for the little specter to settle before crawling into bed himself.

"Goodnight," he muttered as he pulled his thick comforter over his shoulder.

Craig let out a faint growl.

"Eh, don't worry. David's still butthurt since I threw that book at him yesterday. He'll leave us alone tonight."

With that, Tweek reached up beside his nightstand and flipped the switch. The big light went out,

but the nightlight plugged in across the room left a gentle glow rather than pitch dark. It almost felt weird laying down in bed and going to sleep so early, but he was fucking exhausted.

"Bright enough?" Tweek questioned.

Craig replied with silence, which meant yes.

Hours after Tweek finally slipped away into sleep Craig remained alert beneath him.

What was left of bony fingers dug into the bottom of the boxspring. The boy laid flat against it, as if gravity was lost on how to deal with him. Heavy gasps left his sore throat as his gory maw gaped open. His tiny body ached with every cracking bone and empty vein.

There were many other nooks and crannies for a tiny ghost such as himself to hide in, but those dark corners and crawlspaces lacked one thing that under the bed had: Tweek. He could feel the warmth of life seeping down through the mattress and into his trembling fingers. He could hear every rhythmic thump of blood being forced through tight veins. He could hear the wisp of every breath that slipped past lax lips.

He knew the way Tweek's bones ground together when he moved. He knew the clean smell of his skin and he memorized every bump and hill that made up Tweek's face. He knew the soft lids that fluttered over his eyes.

Blue, Craig thought. He thought they were blue, but he couldn't remember. He wondered if his own eyes were that color.

The hard tips of his mutilated fingers found their way into his eye sockets. They scraped along the inside of the rotting holes, where he heard his fingers rub against the hardness of his skull. He cried out softly to himself in sorrow.

The mattress above him squeaked as Tweek shifted in bed. He made small, sleepy sounds. Sounds that made Craig's insides quiver. The little monster crawled along the bottom of the bed before poking out from under the bedspread. Branchlike arms crept up onto the mattress. They quietly pulled Craig up and onto the bed.

He pressed his ear against Tweek's chest. He felt the steady rise and fall of a strong pair of lungs. He heard the heavy thumping of a gentle heart. There was nowhere safer than Tweek. There was nowhere Craig felt more comfortable.

He ran his fingers over each rib until the bony tips were pressing against the softness of his stomach. Craig let out a small sound as the ends of his bones pressed up against the underside of Tweek's ribcage. He was shivering cold, but Tweek was so warm. Desperate for safety, he allowed his tremulous hands to sink underneath the cage of bone that made up Tweek's torso. He could feel every hard piece of it bump along the tops of his fingers as he slid his arms in deeper. The heavily pumping blood. The comforting sound of Tweek's soft breathing. They all grew so much clearer.

Tweek didn't feel it as his chest cavity popped and expanded. There wasn't a pinch when an invisible skull forced itself against the insides of his lungs. There wasn't pain when a tiny body made a bed of his soft organs, and there wasn't a scrape when the tips of Craig's sharp fingers caressed his thumping heart. All there was was a pressure. A dull, tight pressure.

When Tweek couldn't see Craig, his chest ached.

...

It was only a day later an apprehensive teenager found himself standing before the woods of Stark's Pond.

The trees in themselves were daunting. They were tall, eerie pillars that obstructed any and all light. The moment he stepped past the tree line a chilly feeling hit him and an odd fog rolled into his mind. Those woods almost seemed to be a portal to a different world. A dreadful sad world that devoured any sense of hope or joy. Still, Kyle stood as strong as his trembling would allow him.

Wind whistled as he trudged onward through the orchard of death. At least that's what it felt like to Kyle. The arms of dark trees leaned down to pluck at him. The soft, wet ground tried to steal his shoes as he walked forward. The darkness descended upon him like a pillow; harmless until it was being used to smother him.

He was unnerved by the creaking and stirring throughout the forest, but he wasn't as afraid as he was the last time he'd found himself there. This time he knew what he was doing. He knew who was there and where he wanted to go. Though, he wasn't entirely sure how to get there. He'd been wandering through the endless loop of wood and dropping leaves. He never seemed to get any farther, but it was hard to tell the trees apart by the trunks caught in his flashlight. He tried his best to follow his gift through the eerie darkness. Sometimes it acted as an internal compass, which guided him towards those long forgotten.

He didn't stop until he finally reached a particular tree. The only thing setting it apart from the rest was the bear still pinned against the wood. It was withered and old looking thanks to the harsh elements, and some type of green moss turned the Teddy's fluffy foot fibers into a new home. The irresistible urge to feel it under his fingers washed over him like ice water. He licked his lips and stepped towards it. Kenny was not there to thwart him that time.

He knew before he even took hold of it what it was going to do. Tweek was given visions through his eyes. They were given to Kyle through his hands. And so, the wet and mossy paw of the teddy squished unpleasantly between Kyle's shaking fingers.

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

A long, thick nail was driven through the chest of a stuffed animal. The same stuffed animal Kyle was squeezing tightly in his killer grip. The sun was shining through the trees in long beams, illuminating the back of a blond head. Kyle was finally able to pry his rigid fingers away, but the image lingered.

It seemed the Shadowman was behind more than just Stark's mysterious holes. The tree of dolls seemed to Kyle like far less of a mystery. If he spent most of his nights surrounded by the mischievous spirits of children he'd probably want to appease them, too.

Which brought him to the reason he was searching for it in the first place.

His backpack slipped off the peaks of his shoulders, and he dugged through it to find a toy of his own. It was something that used to belong to his little brother, Ike, when he was little. It was a red, stuffed car. It was more like a pillow, really, but he thought it would do fine.

He knelt down at the base of the tree. His flashlight brightened the button eyes of stuffed animals as he set the car down amongst their ranks. He swallowed hard, and then uttered a small message to whatever entities might be listening. And he knew they were.

"I brought this for you - to prove I'm not here to hurt anyone," his throat felt dry as he spoke. "I just want to help Tweek."

Leaves rustled as spirits swayed through the trees. Through the whimsical sound, he heard the familiar grinding of bones. It was a sickening noise he'd only ever heard one other time. He shot up and quickly backed away from the tree.

Something caught in the beam of his flashlight. A small squeak of fear slipped past his lips when he saw a pale figure peeking at him through the forest. Well, it would be peeking if it had any eyes. The little spirit let out a low hiss in warning. The gaping hole of its mouth was just as pitch black as its eyes, but at least it wasn't crammed with razor-like teeth.

Kyle swallowed hard and backed away.

"Please... d-don't chase me," Kyle begged. "I'm not going to hurt you or Tweek or any of your little friends. I promise."

When the disembodied hissing did not cease, Kyle felt his chest tighten up. He never encountered a spirit even comparable to that tiny creature stalking him in the woods. He didn't know what Craig really was, let alone what he was capable of.

"Oh! I brought you a present," Kyle uttered in a bit of a panic.

The hissing slowed when Kyle picked the car up from the tree and held it out with shaking hands. He squeezed it's middle, which played some cheesy theme song for a show he never watched before.

"Go RedRacer, go!" the toy chimed merrily at the peak of its song. When Kyle blinked, the mangled form that had been spying on him was standing only a few feet away. It's rotting face tipped from side to side as it listened to the melody. Tweek liked to call Craig his puppy when he'd do that, as if the decaying cavities his skull were doe eyes and pert lips.

Kyle, however, wasn't blinded by unconditional love.

The apparition's angered hissing was replaced by high cooing, but Kyle didn't feel any safer than he did before. On wobbly legs the pint-sized monster staggered forward. Kyle instinctively let out a scream as long limbs exploded from Craig's back. They snatched the RedRacer plush right out of Kyle's grasp before bolting back into the darkness of the woods. He shined his light through the veil of swaying branches and leaves. That same melody chimed over and over again from somewhere amongst the trees. It echoed distortedly, which made that happy tune seem a lot less happy to Kyle.

Along with the music came faint laughter. After steadily swallowing a wad of spit, Kyle followed the noise aimlessly through the thick foliage. The hope was that Craig would lead him to Tweek. There was really no other way, but he wasn't sure if tailing the giggling of a hostile spirit was the best idea he ever had.

As long as Craig wasn't trying to tear him to shreds he supposed he'd be alright.

Twigs snapped and rustled beneath his shoes as he tried to keep up with Craig's noises. He got nervous when the sounds faded away, but they were soon replaced by something else completely. It was a sharp and heavy noise, like someone slamming metal into earth. He kicked up leaves as he sprinted towards it. He came barreling out of the treeline as his light shined into an opening in the woods. A horrified shriek immediately followed Kyle's ruckus, but it didn't come from him. It came from the six foot tall, hooded figure wielding a shovel nearby.

The Shadowman's first instinct was always to run. Being captured was not an option, and he'd

rather be made out a coward than an idiot. So he turned away from the person who'd just snuck up on him and bolted in the opposite direction.

"Tweek! No, wait! It's me!" Kyle screamed in desperation. "Kyle! Kyle Broflovski!"

Tweek did stop, but he was obviously not trusting. He backed away into a bush, where he had plenty of options for escape if it came to that.

"What the hell are you doing here?" The cloaked figure spat with his shovel raised in defense.

Kyle's hands shot up as a show of submission, then quickly yelled, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to freak you out like that!"

"Wh-... how did you even find me?" Tweek demanded. He was still partially hidden in nearby foliage, but Kyle could see him just fine thanks to the moon and his flashlight.

"Craig led me here," Kyle replied with a nod of his head. "I just... I wanted to help you."

Tweek slowly dropped his tool to his side and slid out from his hiding place. He didn't seem to know what to make of what he was hearing.

"... You came to help me?" Tweek said in a voice unsure and suspicious. "And Craig was the one who brought you here?"

"Well... yeah," Kyle said while fiddling with the grip of his own shovel. It wasn't nearly as long as the Shadowman's, but it stayed put when he slipped the handle in his belt. "I brought him a stuffed animallike the ones you nailed to the tree in the woods."

"How did you know that was me?"

"The teddy bear showed me."

After hearing such a ridiculous thing fall out of Kyle's mouth Tweek replied, "You really are just as fucked up as I am, aren't you?"

"Well... maybe not quite as fucked up."

Tweek didn't care for Kyle's jokes.

"I already told you. I don't need help." In fact, he couldn't stress enough just how much he didn't want Kyle, or anyone else, to be there.

"You aren't even going to give me a chance?" Kyle asked while pulling his own tool off of his belt. It dwarfed the Shadowman's trusted metal companion, but it would work fine nonetheless. "I brought my own shovel if that makes a difference."

Tweek actually frowned at that. Thankfully, the shadows of his hood hid his somber expression.

"Give me a single reason why I should give you or anybody else a chance," Tweek spat bitterly. Kyle could hear a shovel hit the ground again, though he couldn't see it. His flashlight was too busy scanning through the trees to illuminate the person before him.

"Well, I don't know about everybody else, but I'm standing right here with a perfectly good shovel," Kyle replied carefully.

Kyle stood for a moment as Tweek continued to drive the metal tip into the beginnings of a fresh

hole. He didn't say a single word, which sounded more like an open invitation to Kyle. He came up alongside Tweek with his tool at his side and sank it down into the fresh earth. He didn't feel like he was actually accomplishing anything compared to Tweek, who was more than well versed in hole digging. However, there was only one bit of advice the shadowman passed on to the rookie:

"Dig deep."

The Dog

The soothing sound of water bubbled up from between the wooden boards beneath them. Shadows cast by the setting sun made whimsical shapes along the creek, and Kyle smiled to himself when one touched the tip of his dangling foot. Since the bridge was first built along the beaten path of the park, they found a haven in it. It was a quiet and tranquil place; somewhere for deep conversations and pondering questions.

It was a place to confide secrets, which was exactly what Kyle had planned.

He reached down and rubbed the green and white yarn tied around his wrist. The person beside him leaned through the wooden railings to peek down at the water. They were sitting side by side, both pairs of legs hanging over the edge.

"Stan," Kyle began anxiously. He couldn't quite look over at him. He didn't want to see the look of doubt he was about to receive. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

Stan looked over his shoulder. Pieces of his ice-cream sandwich were stuck to his face. He wiped it off with his sleeve before swallowing his mouthful.

"What? What is it?" he asked with uneasiness sullyng his face. When Kyle began a conversation like that, it usually spelled trouble.

Kyle let out a breath he'd been holding. He stared at his hands as he held onto his own ice-cream. Sometimes he wished he could just chop them off.

"I have to tell you something, but you have to believe me, okay? No matter how crazy or weird it sounds. I just need someone to know..."

Stan sat attentively. His brows were raised, and his snack was forgotten in his hands.

"Well..." Kyle scratched the back of his neck. "... I see things other people don't see."

"Like what?"

"Like... I don't know what they are for sure. Ghosts?" he nearly blushed in humiliation having said that.

"You've seen ghosts?" Stan asked with the quirk of his lip. "That's not so bad, my mom's seen one before. My uncle Jimbo did once, too."

Kyle looked down into the water below them. The river flowed lazily around rocks and grass as it passed under their bridge. Stan took another small bite of his ice-cream sandwich. Kyle mimicked him.

"You don't think it's bad because you don't have to live with it," he finally replied between bites. "They can be... horrible."

"Horrible how?"

"Well... there's this girl! She's in the house behind mine. She always looks at me through the window, but she doesn't have a face. She just has this big hole where it should be."

"Whoa," Stan sputtered, almost spewing crumbs all over his shirt. "Wait, really?"

Kyle's gaze flicked down to the water again as he played with the wrapper of his ice cream. "Yeah, really," He finally muttered miserably.

"Hey, It's not that I don't believe you! Just, wow," Stan quickly clarified. "That is pretty scary."

Kyle nodded his head hard. "They all are. Even the ones that look normal. It's like... I can't even look up sometimes because I know one of them are staring at me. It's like a curse."

Stan shook his head at hearing that. "I don't think it's a curse."

"You don't?"

"Well... no, think about it. You're seeing people, right? Like... sure the girl in the window looks scary as hell, but that doesn't make her less of a person. She was somebody's daughter. Maybe even someone's sister, or mom, or best friend. She's up there all by herself, and you can see her," Stan said as he slowly shook his head. "Dude, you could help a lot of people with that one day. I can't speak for you, but I'd call that a gift before I'd call it a curse."

Kyle looked up at Stan with a wavering look. It was moments like those that reminded Kyle why they were such close friends. His green eyes went half lidded as he rested his chin on the railing before him.

"Maybe you're right," Kyle finally said, though it came out garbled because of how he was sitting. Stan's passionate words got him thinking, but no amount of passionate speeches could change the fear tingling the back of Kyle's skull.

A gift or a curse, he wasn't sure.

Stan gave a reassuring smile as Kyle bit into his ice-cream. He had plenty of time to worry about it later.

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Kyle's gaze shifted to the muddy earth they'd been tearing into. Their holes were both deep, but empty. Just two useless dents bored into the ground that held nothing more than dirt and air. Earth worms wriggled through the freshly disturbed soil, but that was all. They had not come across the little boy's decaying body. Kyle doubted they ever would.

He couldn't keep enough strength to compete with the Shadowman. He'd tried and tried for hours to keep up. Literally hours. His arms were tired and weak, and his lungs felt like they were collapsing. A small break wouldn't hurt. He lowered himself down onto the mudcovered ground to let his legs relax. Tweek, on the other hand, did not stop. Not for a moment.

Kyle was sure if Tweek didn't have obligations like sleep and school he would have already hollowed out the earth.

Kyle's legs rested in the grimy hole he dug. It wasn't nearly as deep as Tweek's, seeing as how Tweek was standing knee deep into the earth. He watched the black figure toss aside shovelfuls of ick and grime. Kyle just couldn't imagine doing this every night. How did Tweek keep his grades up? How did he ever get any sleep or make it to school on time?

The pale skin of Tweek's face could easily be seen in the light of the moon. The same was said for the brown bandanna that covered his nose and mouth. The bandanna, Kyle noted, was a new addition to the Shadowman's uniform. Tweek's eyes stayed sharp and focused. They shifted over every grain of dirt and squirming worm. The deeper Tweek dug the softer his shovel hit the

ground.

"You aren't gonna get much deeper at that rate," Kyle said.

Tweek's eyes shifted from his work to Kyle's face. They rested there for a moment before muttering, "If your best friend's body could be only a few inches below you, you wouldn't want to crush his skull with the end of your shovel, would you?"

There was a dog. It stood upright in the grim darkness of the tree line. The tails of its fancy blue suit did not move with the wind that gusted around it. Its bulging black eye did twitch through a monocle. Tweek did not see the dog. Kyle did not see the dog.

You do not see the dog.

Tweek hoisted his tool onto his shoulder and stared down into the hole below him. Those hard eyes softened with defeat when he realized yet again there was no Craig laying curled up beneath his feet. Kyle watched as Shadowman painstakingly began to fill back in the hole he'd spent so long digging up. With a grimace, he stood to do the same.

It didn't take nearly as long to repair the damage they'd done, thankfully. Tweek patted the freshly covered hole with the bottom of his boot before wiping his forehead and sniffing.

"Well... I guess that's it for tonight," Tweek stood for a moment with his eyes clamped closed. He seemed almost to be praying, but Kyle caught a meek apology carried by the breeze. An apology to Craig.

When the six foot figure turned to walk away Kyle was right on his heels. He didn't allow much distance to separate them in fear of getting lost out there again.

"We're making a stop, first. Don't feel like walking all the way home after all that."

Kyle quickly nodded in agreement. The few minutes he spent sitting didn't quite make up for all the breath he lost shoveling. His arms felt like limp noodles, and his legs were stiff and achy. He didn't want to walk either.

He trailed behind his odd companion for a short while before he caught the siding of a house in the beam of his flashlight. It was grimy and chipping away, and broken reflections shined back at him from busted windows. He recognized that house immediately. He could still remember the lambent candle that lead him there.

Tweek sighed in relief as he stepped through the back door. The kitchen looked just like Kyle remembered it. Old and musty. The cabinets were still falling apart. Sections were crumbling out of the frame and most of its doors were broken off, just like before. There was just one small detail he didn't notice until right then. They were littered in cobwebs. Cobwebs with nasty looking spiders on them. It made his skin crawl remembering he'd climbed inside of those webs in his panic. He was probably covered in creepy crawlies when he climbed back out.

"What's wrong?" Tweek asked as he pulled his bandana down around his neck. "You look white."

"N-nothing," He mumbled in response before stepping away from the arachnid farm. "I just can't believe I crawled in that thing."

Tweek actually laughed, which caught Kyle off guard. "Wait, what?"

Kyle dismissed the conversation with a wave of his hand. Tweek was too lazy and disinterested to

ask again. He let his black cloak slip off his shoulders before laying it across the decrepit kitchen table. He placed his shovel there, too, before walking through the kitchen and opening another door. Kyle propped his own shovel up against the wall. He didn't quite feel right thinking about placing it beside Tweek's. Anxious, he followed after him.

When he stepped through the doorway he was met with a colonial looking living room. The couch was old, but fancy. Expensive looking lamps collected dust and grime on the tops of rotting side tables. The windows were covered in floral draperies, and there were dirty squares along the walls where pictures used to be. The centerpiece of the room was a massive fireplace. It was just as ancient as the rest of the room, but it looked like it'd just burned out. Fresh ashes and soot lined its bottom along with a few pieces of trash.

"Let's light the fire and sit for a while," Tweek suggested as he moved across the room.

There was a small collection of twigs and wood loosely thrown into the far corner. Tweek collected a bundle from it before tossing them into the fireplace. Using a bottle of lighter fluid from the mantle, he doused the lumber.

"Isn't there a better way to light it?" Kyle asked with concern when he saw Tweek pull a matchbox from his pocket.

"Probably," Tweek said before striking the match. The wood burst into a mini inferno. A bright, orange glow assaulted Kyle's vision and flicked across their bodies. The eerie shadows of their bodies danced along the flaking wallpaper. After a few blinks Kyle felt grateful and turned off his flashlight.

Tweek was poking at the fire with a metal rod when Kyle's phone went off. It was such a loud and intrusive sound they both jumped about ten feet. Kyle quickly dug in the pocket of his jacket to silence the loud wailing. When he pulled it out a familiar name displayed across the screen. Kenny.

"Hello?" He questioned into the receiver as Tweek glanced back at him.

"Ky? Hey, where the hell are you?"

"What do you mean?" Kyle asked. "It's like one in the morning you should be in bed."

"Yeah, so should you," Kenny retorted. "Where are you?"

"Umm, I dunno," Kyle shrugged as innocently as he could manage, as if Kenny could see that.

"Apparently your mom doesn't, either. She called and said you were spending the night to help me with my homework, which I thought was kind of funny seeing as how that's not a thing that happened."

"Well... what did you tell her?" Kyle suddenly asked in the most petrified voice Kenny had ever heard. If she found out Kyle lied about going to Kenny's so he could dig up bodies with the Shadowman, he would probably end up grounded. Or dead. He could also end up dead.

"I told her sorry but you were sleeping, of course," Kenny grumbled more to himself it seemed. "I don't like lying to your mom, man. It makes me feel weird."

"Ugh. I'm sorry. I just needed a cover. I do it for you all the time."

"Because I'm a rotten bad boy who likes to roam the streets at night and party. You don't do either of those things, so fess up. Where are you?"

"Um," Kyle tapped his feet against the dirty rug beneath him. "Wait, what did you say? I -n't hear yo-."

Tweek watched with a cocked brow as Kyle made static noises into his cell phone.

"Kyle, don't you dare."

"What was that? Sshhhhhhhkkssh, sorry I can't- you're breaking shh up."

"You little turd don't you hang up on-"

Kyle shoved his phone in his pocket. He and Tweek stared at one another in silence. The humored look on Tweek's face demanded an explinaion.

Kyle grinned and shrugged. "It was Kenny. He kinda worries a lot, you know..."

Tweek looked back into the fire. Kyle squatted down and scooted closer, raising both his hands up towards the warmth of the flames.

"... why are you here?" Tweek asked in quiet thought.

"I told you, to help-"

"No, why are you really here?"

Kyle went silent for a short while. Was it really so hard for Tweek to accept that someone just cared enough to lend him a hand? Then again, that wasn't Kyle's entire reason for being there, was it?

Kyle's mouth twisted as he patted globs of dirt off of his knees.

"You know, when we were younger I had such a hard time understanding you," Kyle uttered as he continued to flick blades of grass off his jeans. "I was so scared of anybody treating me different I kept my gift a secret, and there you were telling everybody who'd listen about yours. Even though they made fun of you, you wouldn't deny it or try to take it back."

Tweek just kept on poking at the fire. It was almost like he wasn't listening, but Kyle knew he was.

"But you never told anyone until Craig came. You weren't doing it for yourself, you were doing it for him."

"So what? What does that have to do with anything?"

Kyle looked down at his mud-caked shoes. He bit his bottom lip and let out a low sigh.

"I used to have a friend. Someone who meant everything to me. He always said that people like you and I had our power because we'd use it to help others... but I never did. I never tried to help anyone. How could I if I was so scared of them?" Kyle kept his gaze trained onto the freshly lit fire before him. He was trying so hard to sound confident, but kept falling short. "I was so terrified that I looked things up online to keep them away. I tried salt circles and all different kinds of candles, blessed buckeyes, covered my mirrors- everything. I spent so long trying to pretend they weren't there I don't know anything about them. Now that I have someone I want to help my gift is useless."

Tweek had stopped what he was doing to listen. Kyle caught his attention, but it was even harder to speak with those eyes burning through him.

"But you... you've spend every moment of every day with one... you have to know more about it- more about what we are and what we can do... more about them."

Tweek set his poker down on the hardwood floor before exhaling a sigh.

"Listen, Kyle," Tweek muttered. He ran his tongue along the edges of his teeth as he tried to find a way to gently explain this to him. "If you've made it this far unscathed, keep doing what you've been doing. You don't want to know about them. I promise you that much. And as for your friend... well, I don't know how to help mine, either."

The fire flicked across Kyle's stern face. He shook his head with the same stubborn resolve that get him into that mess in the first place. "I already know some. I get visions through my hands when I touch things- sometimes they're terrible. I've seen their faces and heard their voices- one even chased me. So don't go treating me like some delicate flower who can't handle this. I'm fucking not."

Tweek found himself so intrigued he wasn't even startled by Kyle's cursing. Getting visions just by touching things? Tweek definitely couldn't do that. He needed his eyes for visions while it seemed like all Kyle needed were his hands.

Weird, but interesting.

"Well, then, since y-you're so keen on stirring up things." Shit. Tweek's stutter was rearing its ugly head. "First thing's first. I don't know if you noticed, but not all of them are nice. Don't go around expecting to 'send them into the light' or something dumb like that- some of them can touch you. Some of them can hurt you."

"... I know that," Kyle admitted with the weakest nod. Well, he knew part of that. His encounter with Craig was so petrifying because he had no idea he could be physically assaulted. He still bared the wounds around his ankle from those sharp fingertips, and now Tweek was saying he wasn't the only one with that power.

Tweek was staring at him dumbly, as if he was waiting for a sentence to be finished. Sighing weakly, Kyle decided to roll up his dirty pant leg and showcase his battle scars. There were five little holes in his leg. There was one for each of that little monster's fingers. Tweek rolled up his nose before moving closer. He took a hold of Kyle's ankle and stared at the healing wounds with furrowed brows.

"What did this to you?" He asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"Well... Craig," Kyle replied timidly. "The first time I saw him he came after me and dragged me to the ground."

"Wait. He attacked you?" Tweek shot a look of shock into the darkness behind him. Kyle couldn't help but notice movement amongst the flickering shadows. A long, dark figure spilt away from the corner. Disembodied booming filled the room as a tiny pair of feet slammed along the staircase. Craig ran upstairs to hide.

Tweek frowned. Kyle swallowed hard.

"I don't think he was trying to hurt me. I figured he was just protecting you, I mean... there were all these kids in a circle around him and-"

"Were they holding hands?"

"...Yeah."

That was explanation enough for Tweek. Kyle stumbled upon Craig in the midst of an attack. He broke the healing circle. Craig went berserk. It made sense, but it didn't mean he was any less upset. His Craig trying to hurt someone? It seemed unthinkable.

"I'm sorry," Tweek uttered as he pulled Kyle's pant leg back down. "He just kind of has these... fits sometimes, you know? It's like he gets scared and just goes off the deep end."

"Oh... like a panic disorder?" Kyle asked as he wrapped his arms around his knees. "If someone drown him in the pond he could have some kind of Post Traumatic Stress..."

Tweek stared at Kyle for a long moment without as much as a blink.

"It kinda creeps me out how you know things like that," Tweek said.

"I creep you out?" Kyle scoffed. "I'm not the one with a weird little ghost stalking me."

Tweek knit his brows together, giving Kyle a horrified stare. His eyes shifted nervously towards the wall to Kyle's back.

"What?... Then who's that?"

Startled, Kyle turned around to try to catch a glimpse of whatever Tweek was seeing. Unlike Tweek, all he saw was the crumbling floral pattern of wallpaper in the fire light. He blinked and looked back at his companion as shivers trickled up his spine.

"Who is who?" Kyle demanded as he went ridged.

Tweek kept his eyes trained onto the wall for a moment before looking back into the fire.

"Nevermind," was all he said, which only freaked Kyle out even more. So much so that he moved so his back wouldn't be facing that particular wall.

"How about we go back home," Tweek decided quickly as he stood up. "I just have to go coax Craig down real quick."

That thought was like a rusted nail being driven into Kyle's head. He was slowly trying to accompany himself to Craig and his grotesque form. His terrifying ability to hurt him if only he had the mind. Craig didn't love Kyle like he loved Tweek, and Kyle didn't have any defense against him.

At least not that he was aware of.

Heavy footsteps snapped him out of his trance. Tweek's boots creaked the stairs as he ascended into the darkness. Kyle flicked on his flashlight to watch as he stood up to follow. Looking up towards the second story, he was met with a wall of pitch black. Not even the beam of his flashlight could cut through it.

Tweek waded easily through the black fog. He wouldn't have been much of a shadowman if he couldn't. He already knew where Craig was. His boots creaked the floorboards as he headed towards a particular door. It lead to a bedroom. Inside was a makeshift table littered with paper coffee cups, a map tacked up against the wall, and a door. From beyond that door was the quiet sound of children's sobs. The sound Tweek couldn't handle hearing. He gripped the handle, but it wouldn't budge.

Tweek leaned against the frame and pressed his forehead into the wood.

"Craig," he uttered quietly.

There was a rustling. One hundred and twenty little fingers scraped along the walls inside. A low gurgling bubbled out from within, accompanied by the miserable cries of a guilt-ridden child.

Tweek closed his eyes.

"I know you didn't mean to hurt him," he uttered against the door. "You were just as scared as he was, I know."

Something pressed up against the other side of the door. A few little stray hands poked out from the crack underneath, their fingers ready to be caressed and forgiven. The majority of his limbs, along with Craig himself, remained locked inside his anguish.

'Go, Red Racer! Go!' chimed from inside. Craig was curled up in the corner while clutching the stuffed toy against his chest. Hands caressed his shoulders as he heaved. He didn't even care a few of his arms had wandered away. At least not until he felt a big pair of fingers rub some of digits wriggling though the gap in the floor. They quickly latched onto Tweek, and Craig's heaving slowed.

Meanwhile, Kyle was still fidgeting at the bottom of the staircase.

"Are you coming back down?" he demanded for the thousandth time only to be answered with the pops of the fireplace. Fuck, he felt so uneasy being left in that room alone.

'Go Red Racer! Go!' suddenly sank down from the darkness, followed by low and mischievous laughter.

He could feel his muscles tensing in fear. Oh, good god he did not want to go up there. For all he knew he'd come face to face with an otherworldly creature hell-bent on devouring his soul. But Tweek was taking so fucking long, and that creepy feeling was not going away. He anxiously rubbed the yarn around his wrist.

Against his better judgment, he carefully took his first step onto the staircase. A screaming figure lurched out of the darkness and plummeted onto the stairs with a startling slam. His heart fucking exploded. Kyle let out a terrified scream and instinctively hurtled his flashlight at the wailing creature.

"Ouch!" he heard someone yelp as the heavy thing bounced off of their shoulder and went tumbling back down the steps. He had not just encountered an otherworldly creature hell-bent on devouring his soul. He encountered Tweek, who was laughing like the fucking idiot he was.

"Wh- Holy shit! What'd you do that for?!" Kyle demanded. His heart was still thumping so hard he thought he might faint, but Tweek was beyond pleased with himself. "You scared the piss out of me!"

"Hey, if you wanna keep hanging around me, you better get used to getting scared," Tweek warned through his humored chuckling.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Tweek replied with a shrug, which made Kyle frown. He couldn't tell if Tweek was being sincere or just trying to scare him away.

"Well that's enough of that," Tweek said while rubbing his shoulder as if to make sure it was still in place. At least Kyle got a good whack at him. "Let's put out the fire and get going."

It was simply a given that Tweek would be walking him home again. Neither said a word against or for it. They both just walked through the spider covered kitchen and made their way out together. Tweek grabbed his robe on his way, though he stuffed it in a backpack that had been sitting under the table. He didn't want to be spotted leaving the pond with it.

As soon as they stepped onto the porch a chilly breeze swept over them. Kyle zipped his jacket up to his chin as Tweek stepped off the wooden stoop. The moon was still dangling high above them, which left plenty of light out in the clearing. He jogged after Tweek and turned on his flashlight yet again to see through the creaking trees and rustling leaves.

That's when he noticed something he found particularly disturbing. The back of Tweek's jacket was... squirming. He shined his flashlight on the disturbing show as he followed behind at an increasing distance. It was almost like tiny fingers were sprouting from Tweek's spine and scraping along the fabric. Tweek noticed the tugging at the cloth, but only put up his hood.

"T-tweek," Kyle whispered when the other didn't stop.

When Tweek finally turned around, Kyle was met with an unsettling sight. A pair of arms had sprouted from the darkness of his jacket to wrap tightly around his neck. They looked as though they'd been decaying under someone's porch for a year, but Tweek didn't seem to mind at all that they were there. Kyle jumped and stumbled back when a tiny face poked out from inside Tweek's hood. It wasn't the first time Kyle saw those rotting holes, but they never seemed to frighten him.

"It's just Craig," Tweek muttered as the eyeless face buried itself into his neck.

Kyle swallowed hard, but hesitantly continued to follow his odd companions through the woods. The big lump under Tweek's jacket didn't seem to deter him in the slightest.

Neither spoke as they finally left the pond and came upon the church. A woman was sitting at the bench as they passed. She smiled and waved, oblivious to the jacket draped horror clinging to Tweek's back. The hooded teen returned the gesture, and the woman went back to playing on her phone.

"She can't even see your jacket's lifted up, can she?" Kyle asked under his breath.

"No."

And again, they were doused in silence. The only conversation being had was between their footsteps and Craig's garbled noises. It sounded like the little thing was in so much agony. It remained that way until they yet again found themselves on the sidewalk in front of Kyle's house. He wasn't really sure how he was going to explain coming home at... he checked his phone... three o' clock in the morning to his mom, but he'd figure something out.

"Can I ask you one more question?" Kyle said as he stepped up onto his parent's front stoop.

Tweek's gaze wavered a moment as he clutched onto the handle of his backpack. He nodded stiffly. Those grungy, bruised arms were still interlaced around his neck. Kyle pretended it didn't bother him.

"So... at the house," Kyle uttered while he rang his hands together. "Did you really see someone behind me, or were you just trying to scare me like on the stairs?"

Tweek furrowed his brows together before looking down at his feet. "Do you want me to tell you the truth?"

Kyle immediately nodded.

"I wasn't lying."

"What did it look like?" Kyle asked before Tweek could even finish his sentence. "Did you see who it was?"

Tweek couldn't help but stare at Kyle dumbly. The last thing he expected was for Kyle to be excited. Then again, Kyle had his own issues too, and Tweek wasn't about to pretend to know what they were.

"No. It's face was gone," Tweek replied honestly.

Kyle's expression dropped dramatically before he wrapped himself tighter in his jacket.

"So... so is Craig always in pain?" Kyle asked quietly. "When people die do they just... always stay the way they were when it happened?"

Tweek slowly nodded. "Pretty ghosts don't exist- not unless they went in tact. If you die in a fire your skins gonna always be scorching. It's just... how it works."

Kyle's eyes slid downward with a deep sorrow Tweek hadn't expected. It almost made him feel bad, but he wasn't going to lie just to spare Kyle's feelings. If he really wanted to learn more about them, he better get used to the truth being ugly. Tweek still felt bad, though, when he looked into Kyle's eyes. It was visibly obvious how upset he'd become.

Kyle nodded his head with a small smile, but tears were brimming in the corners of his eyes.

"Well... thank you," he finally muttered, "for talking to me."

With that, Kyle slowly shut the door once again.

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That day was a dark and confusing time for Kenny and company. They all sat fidgeting around their table. Not a single bite had been taken of their breakfasts, (except for Cartman's) and Kenny was tapping his fingers against the tabletop. Not a single one of them said anything, but they were all quietly contemplating over the same empty seat.

Where the hell was Kyle?

Butters finally cleared his throat to bring a voice to all of their concerns. "Maybe he went to class early- to study or something."

That seemed like as logical of an excuse as any. He did occasionally ditch breakfast to study in the silence of his first period classroom.

"He wasn't on the bus, though," Kenny muttered more to himself in thought. He had a little more reason than the others to worry. He was the only one who knew that Kyle was off doing god knows what the night before. What if he didn't make it home? What if something terrible happened? No. No, he wouldn't allow himself to believe he could have lost another friend.

"Maybe he's sick," Cartman offered with feigned disinterest.

"But Kyle never missed a day of school, not since fifth grade," Butters said in worry. "He wouldn't just forfeit his perfect attendance 'cause he wasn't feeling well."

The table grew quiet after that. Their minds were running wild with the terrible things that could have happened. Kenny, however, wasn't going to just sit and stew in worry. He felt he knew Kyle better than anyone, and there were a few places he was bound to be hiding. He stood up from his seat. The warm meal on his plate was completely untouched as he worked his way around the table.

"Ey, where do you think you're going?" Cartman barked from behind him. Kenny didn't answer. He didn't want to be chased after.

Kenny had a short list of places Kyle ran away to when he was upset. He hoped that's all his disappearance meant. It better have been, or else he was calling in a police squad because god dammit if he lost another friend. That was his only thinking as he checked himself out in the office and headed outside.

...

Grass swayed in the early morning breeze. The sun was still just beginning to peek up over the mountain tops and a thin layer of sparkling dew lingered in the grass. Kenny bit his lower lip when he caught a glimpse of someone's legs dangling over the edge of the bridge.

Feeling his chest swell up with relief, he ran up the dirt path that lead to the wooden structure. It was indeed Kyle. Kenny could spot that bright green ushanka from a mile away. His feet lightly approached. Kyle's arms were propped up on the bottom half on the wooden railing. His face was buried in them.

Kyle didn't raise his head up when he heard someone else's feet move along the boards beneath him. He just sat there in relative silence, expecting them to just pass by without a word. He was wrong. They came to a stop beside him, and he peeked up over his arm when he felt someone sit down and hang their feet over the edge like he had been. The moment he caught a glimpse of orange he knew who it was.

"What are you doing out here on a school day?" Kenny questioned with that wide smile of his.

Kyle put his face back into his arms to keep Kenny from seeing how wet his cheeks were. He shrugged.

Kenny's eyes grew softer. The planks below them creaked as Kyle slowly inched closer. After clearing his throat, he draped his arm over his friend's shoulders.

"It's not fair," Kyle finally whimpered.

"What's not?"

"That people have to die. Young people who haven't even gotten to live yet."

Kenny's usually wide grin melted into a straight line. He leaned forward against the railing to watch the current of water swoosh beneath them. He squeezed Kyle's shoulder.

Unbeknownst to Kyle, Kenny knew more about death than he'd ever venture to guess. Every answer he ever wanted was sitting right beside him, not that Kenny would ever tell. Death was a dark and scary place, and all Kenny wanted was to keep Kyle's mind away from it. To protect him from it.

That was proving harder and harder.

"Kyle," Kenny began gently. "... is this about the ghosts?"

Kyle wiped at his cheeks before he looked up into the morning sky. He didn't want to lie. Not to Kenny.

He let out a quiet breath before his head rested against the wooden railing.

"Yes."

"Is... is that why you've been asking so much about Craig?" Kenny pondered aloud.

Kyle closed his eyes tight to keep the brightness of the sun out of them. He knocked his heel against the bottom of the bridge.

"Yes."

A look crossed Kenny's face that he was glad Kyle didn't see. It was one of pure horror when he realized the implications of it. They were right. Craig didn't just run off into the night. He isn't out there living the life of a hobo somewhere.

He was gone.

They swapped roles. This time it was Kenny wanting to ask all the questions neither of them had answers to. Instead, he held his tongue before resting his upper half against the plank before him.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Kenny promised quietly. "But did something happen last night?"

"I... I found something out," Kyle admitted as he scratched his nails against the rail. "That... when someone dies, they stay the way they were the moment it happened."

This was not news to Kenny. He found that out the first time his brains were splattered across pavement.

After a shaky sigh, Kyle continued.

"I don't think there are any bright lights that take souls to some better place- death is like a painful limbo. If you died cause your head was smashed in it's going to stay smashed in. You'll feel that forever," Kyle shook his head hard. He wanted to wipe the tears brimming in the edges of his eyes again, but all that would do was draw more attention to them.

"So... if I ever did get to see him again..." He couldn't hold it back anymore. A sob spilled out of him. "Would I even get see his face?"

No Such Things

It had been days since he'd seen the light of the sun. His entire world had been reduced to only pitch darkness and the filthy mattress underneath him. His limbs ached from his restraints and his mouth was bone dry. He would do anything for a cup of water. Anything. By that time, he didn't even bother to scream for help anymore. He didn't bother to even try to escape. Any previous attempts only left him laying bound on the floor, and the man didn't like that.

Craig didn't like that, either.

He let his mouth fall slightly open only for cold air to assault his tongue. Water. He wanted water. He wanted the rope tearing into his flesh to disappear, the feeling of grass beneath his toes, and to hear the soft spoken words of his mother. He wanted a lot of things, but learned better than to wish for them.

"Look, do you see?" a voice suddenly said. It came from somewhere inside his room, though he couldn't pinpoint exactly where. It startled him, but he didn't jump. He just laid there in the darkness while trying to slow his breathing.

"Yes, I do see," replied another voice.

They were the sounds of children. Craig thought the voices belonged to people much younger than himself. He whimpered as he struggled to turn towards them. The rope that trapped him to the headboard dug into his raw wrists. It stung and burned, but he hadn't heard another voice in so long. He was desperate to reach out for help.

"He doesn't have long, now", another child whispered to the others. *"What do we do?"*

"Hello?" Craig called out again in desperation. "C-can you hear me?"

Did you hear that? Asked a voice.

Yes, he hears us, replied another.

He hears us, a plethora of children chimed in eerie unison. Their voices all exploded into random, excited chatter.

"Who are you?" Craig muttered through his cracked lips and dry teeth. For the first time he found himself thankful for the pitch darkness of the room. Whoever those kids were, he didn't want them to see him. He didn't want anyone to see him that way.

We laid there like you once, each of us, one at a time, a shuttering voice explained.

Yes, said another, *We are you now, and you are us.*

Not unless he dies, argued one.

We will not allow that.

Craig sniffled. The tiny voices seemed to be coming from every direction. One would echo from across the room while another would whisper right into the shell of his ear. He would have been petrified if he had the ability to feel. He shook his head. Surely there was no way any of them could see it, but they all burst into disorganized and whispered sentences anyway.

"I... I don't want to die," Craig said. His aching head laid down on one of his arms. It wasn't until then he felt all the grime on his face. "I can't. I-... I want my mom."

His voice was so horse and raspy even he could barely hear it. Still, all the voices again exploded into muffled murmuring. It sounded like they were in the midst of ten different conversations, none of which Craig had the energy to eavesdrop on. His lips pressed together and trembled. He really did want his mom. He wanted to smell her flowery perfume again and see the little grin she'd get when he hugged her.

He let out a quiet sob.

Oh, no. He's crying.

The scrambled voices slowly pulled together to organize into a soft melody. Craig recognized the soothing lullaby immediately: Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star. They were trying to help him in what little ways they could, which was just comforting enough for Craig's cries to slow into sniffing.

Don't cry, one of the voices said as it broke away from the singing others. *We will help you.*

Craig didn't believe them. He tried to get away so many times he'd become convinced there was no exit. Of course, the man always opened a door to come in, but he could never find it. Even when he slipped out of his restraints he just wandered in circles around the room feeling the walls.

It's coming, a voice whispered urgently.

Their song fell entirely apart as the voices again chattered in a frenzy amongst themselves.

It's coming, they all cried together.

The voices suddenly came to a halt. Craig lifted his head up and stilled his breathing to try to hear them, but they'd vanished entirely. He was alone again.

"H-hello?" he called out into the empty room. "Where'd you go?"

The squeaking of rusted metal answered him, which made the boy go silent. When he heard wood creak beneath heavy shoes he bit down on his lip. He knew what those sounds meant and who they belonged to, and it wasn't friendly children.

...

It was unusually cold that evening. At least according to Richard, Tweek's father. He walked around the house all day in a light jacket and blue jeans while obsessively checking the thermostat, which was never below 75 degrees. Helen, his wife, told him he was just being difficult. She and Tweek felt perfectly warm, after all. He insisted there was a chill and proved it with the goose bumps raising on his arms, but there wasn't much that could be done about it. He just suffered through his Sunday wrapped in a snuggly.

Tweek didn't go to Stark's that night, at least not right away. He went to his bedroom around 9pm, the same time as the rest of the family. Helen fell right asleep believing her son would be safe at home. For Richard, that night would prove to be anything but restful.

He still felt chilled even lying in bed under his covers. He shivered himself to sleep only to wake back up a few hours later because his feet were so cold. Richard tossed and turned in bed for what felt like an eternity before a very peculiar sound startled him. He sat upright in bed. The blackness in his room suddenly felt daunting. It was like trying to see through a thick, black sheet. If he didn't

know any better, he'd say he even felt like he was being watched.

Pfft.

He was a no-nonsense man who didn't believe in the things his son did. Ghosts were just as responsible for bumps in the night as the Tooth Fairy was for change under pillows. Still, loud shuffling and gurgling pierced the quiet of the room. They were disgusting sounds, and they were coming from right outside his bedroom door. He slipped quietly out of bed and grabbed the golf club he kept behind his night stand.

The sounds continued, though they were accompanied by quiet muttering and burbling he couldn't decipher. He slowly approached his door, but didn't want to alert the intruder of his presence quite yet. Instead, he squatted down in front of his doorknob and tried to peek out the keyhole. The kitchen light had been left on, which allowed a dim glow to fill the living room. However, when he pressed his face up against the lock to peek out, he only saw a cavern of black. It was like peering into a pool of tar.

He rolled up his nose at the rancid smell that came along with it. It was only comparable to wet earth and rotting road kill. The odor was so intense it made his eyes water. He pulled back to blink the water away, then made one last effort to see out of the hole.

To his confusion, he was met with the sight of his living room. The light in the kitchen was indeed still on, which allowed him a good view of everything outside.

Everything, including the small person huddled in a ball in front of the couch. It was small enough to startle Richard into dropping his golf club. His intruder was a child? A filthy looking child. It rocked back and forth while clutching its knees. He heard slow and garbled gurgling sounds, just like the noises that awoke him from his sleep, though they didn't sound as near. The child's head tipped back, which revealed the blood caked shirt it was wrapped in.

In a panic, Richard made for the doorknob. The moment it came open the child had vanished, but heavy footsteps slammed up the staircase. He anxiously trotted up the steps after it, following a slimy path of grime it left behind in its footprints.

It was standing in the middle of the hall, staring into Tweek's open door as it rocked back and forth on its heels. He could see it clear as day as he stood at the top of the stairs. It was disturbing, to say the least.

"Um... h-hello," Richard uttered despite his fear. This was a child, afterall. A pained, wounded, child who most likely snuck into his home to hide. The father in him wanted to be as gentle as possible. "I'm Richard..."

Its gaze shifted towards him. He sucked in a heavy breath that got snagged in his throat. It was gawking right at him. Gaping holes were where its eyes should have been. They were a deathly black. A deep black cavern of tar.

Richard stood paralyzed.

To his horror, he realized what was blocking his keyhole.

The creature's mouth distorted into a twisted hole when it noticed his presence and wailed. Richard stumbled back, but managed to grab a hold of the railing rather than tumble down the stairs. The monster ran into Tweek's room, and the door slammed shut behind it.

Richard instantly bolted for the handle, but the door wouldn't open. The metal turned under his

fingers and he rammed his shoulder into the wood, but something was pushing it closed from the other side. He banged on it as hard as he could.

"Tweek! Tweek, open the door!" he demanded in a panic. He had no idea what that thing was or what it could be doing to his son. The longer he went unanswered the more petrified he became.

When the door did come open he nearly spilled inside. Tweek was standing there. He was fully dressed- even had on that gaudy black cloak thing he was privy to.

"What's wrong?" Tweek asked with a worried look. It wasn't often he saw his father worked up over much of anything, with the exception of coffee. Yet there he was, heaving so hard sweat was starting to appear on his brow. His father stepped back into the hallway before running his hands over his face.

He didn't dare tell Tweek what he'd just seen.

"Oh... oh, it's fine I just... I thought I heard something in your room," he lied the best he could. "Couldn't get the door open."

Tweek gave Richard a weird look, raising one of his brows up high. "You... thought you heard something. Like what?"

"Ah, it's not- it's not important." The best way to smooth over that situation was to derail it entirely. So, he uttered in an accusatory tone, "Where do you think you're going?"

Tweek looked down at his clothes before muttering, "Going on a walk."

For the first time ever Richard was actually glad to be hearing that. His head was still swimming with confusion and fear. Something was in Tweek's bedroom. Something really was, and it snuck out in the middle of the night to watch him sleep through his keyhole.

"Well, um..." Tweek said as he sidestepped his father and wandered out into the hall. "I guess I'll be going now."

Richard nodded, but followed after as Tweek walked down the stairs. As that sleeved cloak wafted behind his son's tall frame Richard couldn't help but second guess everything he'd known. Everything he tried to convince Tweek of for all of those years.

No, Richard. Ghosts aren't real. You are an adult- you know that.

Then what had he seen?

A cold breeze poured into the living room when Tweek opened the front door. He turned back to his father before giving him a small nod goodbye. Richard returned the gesture.

"I'll be back before morning, probably," Tweek said as he played with the red bandana in his pocket. "D-don't wait up."

He loathed hearing those words. He loathed having no idea where his own son was going or when he'd be home. His own teenage son. But what else was a father to do, call the cops? No.

No, he couldn't.

He frowned when the door was shut behind Tweek, and he stood there for a short while just thinking to himself. He turned to look back into his faintly lit living room with a knot in his throat.

There are no such things as ghosts, he thought to himself as he ran to his bedroom.

There are no such things as ghosts, he thought again as he covered his keyhole with a piece of duct tape.

There are no such things.

...

Karen McCormick was not the only little girl in South Park who had a guardian angel. Though Karen's came in a purple cape opposed to a robe as black as death, their purpose was just the same.

Protect the girl.

The Shadowman's boots were as mud streaked as ever when he slipped in through a plastic frame in the wall. It was a tight squeeze, but he slid in just fine. All the doors and most of the windows were locked by the time nightfall came, but they always forgot the same one. It was a rather small, high window installed in the walk in closet. The old tree outside was all he needed to scale the house and slip in undetected. He preferred it over the gnome infested front door, anyway.

He walked through the small room of clothes and stuffed animals, being careful not to step on any. He opened the closet and stepped out into the bedroom. The pale, pastel colors of the little room were muddled by the darkness. Despite that, he still noticed a shifting lump in the bed. A shifting lump that soon exploded with a young girl. Stuffed animals tumbled onto the floor. She nearly went tumbling with them as he launched out of bed and ran to the dark figure that just slipped out from behind her closet door. She pulled the Shadowman into a tight hug around his middle and remained there until he pressed his gloved hand against the top of her red hair.

"What's wrong, Tricia?" He quietly asked.

The twelve year old girl looked up at him. He came right away, just like every other time she'd called him scared in the middle of the night. In fact, she had no idea the lengths he went to be there. She pressed her face back into the black cloth and squeezed him even tighter. He almost always showed up in those robes.

"I... I think there's a ghost in my room," she replied with a quiver in her voice.

Tweek frowned, and then slowly nodded. "What makes you think that?"

"Something keeps scratching at my window," she uttered in terror. The girl pulled back to point her finger towards the sounds, "and I think I heard a voice."

Tweek subtly tipped his head to the side when he realized that situation was a familiar one. He remembered his own deep seeded fears as a child. He also remembered how there was no one there to believe him. How he was told to stop making up stories.

He would believe Tricia. He would explore all her little ghosts, real or imaginary.

"Okay, go get in bed, and me and Craig will check it out," he replied calmly.

She did just as he asked of her. She let go and ran to her bed. What remained of her stuffed animals bounced as she jumped in it and pulled her covers back up over herself. Tricia watched from the warmth of her comforter while the cloaked figure in the middle of her bedroom turned and ghosted towards the window. As Tweek approached the draperies he didn't sense any spectral presence, at least none he hadn't before.

The drapes were pulled open as he peered outside, but there was nothing to be seen. Nothing but a few long, crooked twigs of a tree scraping along the window's glass. He opened it before reaching outside to break away the sticks. Craig tried to help, too. A couple stray little arms reached out into the dark alongside him, but they weren't much help. Rather than being of any assistance they just swayed in the breeze making grabby-hands.

Tweek smiled at the boy standing beside him when he finished his job. Craig's little fingers continued to blindly grab for tree branches about a foot away from where they even were. Tweek reached out and gathered up the three arms that slipped outside before pulling them back in and shutting the breeze out.

No more scratchy sounds.

He figured the whispering noises she heard were just the breeze whistling in through a gap in the windowsill, so he slipped a piece of paper underneath it to try to fix that problem, too. He turned to the little girl hiding in her bed.

"No ghosts, just a few tree branches," he uttered before walking towards her. Craig stiffly waddled after the sound of Tweek's footsteps. He was still making grabby-hands, though it was at the hood of Tweek's cloak that time.

Tricia sighed loudly in relief before she sat up in bed. It became obvious by the blush on her cheeks how embarrassed she was, though. She called terrified in the middle of the night over an unruly tree of all things.

"Sorry for making you come all this way," she muttered while twirling a lock of her hair.

He shook his head before sitting down at the edge of her bed. He blended so well into the darkness of her room she could almost mistake him for a ghost.

"It's what I'm here for," Tweek finally replied. Craig's arms curiously crept around Tricia's bed, feeling her stuffed animals and getting tangled up in her iron foot board. She didn't notice any of this, and Tweek pretended like he didn't either.

"... can I have one more favor?" She asked the dark form sitting at the edge of her mattress.

"Of course," Tweek replied. His scratchy voice pierced through the dark between them, which was comforting for Tricia.

"Can you stay here until I fall asleep?"

A small smile crept onto Tweek's face, though Tricia couldn't see it from under his bandana. The figure nodded, and Tricia settled a little better into her pillow. All was silent for a while. She laid there with her eyes closed and took comfort in the weight on the foot of her mattress. She didn't have any reason to be afraid anymore. When Tweek was with her like this she felt invincible. It was almost like she'd tamed a creature other children went to bed fearing. Yes, there was the unsettling black form of a

person sitting on her bed, but it was there to keep watch over her.

Tweek and Craig would always watch over her.

Craig...

She looked down at her fingers as she played with them in thought. "Hey, Tweek?"

After moments passed with no answer, she decided to continue.

"Can I ask you about my brother?"

Tweek blinked at the request. It hadn't been the first time she asked that. In fact, they talked about Craig quite a lot. The things he did when he was alive. The way he talked, the way he played, how much he loved her. Despite that, she was careful to never talk about after he went away. Understandably, the subject was just as taboo in the Tucker household as it was in the Tweek's. Tricia was brought up knowing better than to say something to make her mom cry or her father get upset. That tense feeling spilled over to Tweek. Sometimes shed eavesdrop on those conversations between himself and her mother, but she'd never ask herself.

"I still don't remember a whole lot about him," she admitted weakly while shaking her head. Her pigtails were let down for bed, so her long hair swayed with the gesture. "I know his face and a few times we'd played together, but I can't remember him like everyone else can. I just remember when he went away."

Tweek turned away to look at the shadows dancing along the wall from the tree outside.

"Well you were only seven," Tweek replied. "It's natural you wouldn't remember much from when you were little."

"I guess so," she replied. "But... it doesn't feel right. It's like there's a piece of me missing."

Tweek knew that feeling all too well.

"I just wish I could see him like you can," she admitted after letting out a thick breath she'd been holding. "I want to see him again and talk to him. Maybe he could tell me why he went away."

After a long silence, she finally asked, "Can't... can't you tell me?... About what happened to my brother?"

Tricia had no idea what terrible thing she just asked for. While Tweek loved Craig very much, even in the ghostly form he takes now, he would never want Tricia to see him. He wanted her to remember his face like it was in pictures. He wanted her to remember who he was before he was left torn apart and traumatized. The Craig she wanted to see again was dead. Dead in the most terrible ways. He could never explain that to a child. Never.

So he didn't say anything.

"Please?" Tricia quietly begged.

Tweek sighed. Luckily, though, if there was one thing he learned from his parents it was how to dance around sensitive subjects.

"I don't know what happened, not for sure. Just that someone took him away," even that much was hard to confess. "But he's with me now, and I'm taking good care of him."

Tricia nodded her head. She believed him. Unlike most everyone else, she always believed him.

"You're gonna find him, right?... The person who took my brother?"

"Of course," Tweek assured calmly. "Well... I'm trying my best. I've been trying for a long, long time."

"I know. I know you'll do it," Tricia commented before she sank back down under neath her fluffy comforter. "You're a superhero, after all. Bad guys don't stand a chance."

"A superhero?" Tweek asked with a bit of shock in his voice.

"Yeah. You always come to protect me, and you're looking for bad guys," she replied while she rolled over onto her pillow. "That sounds like a superhero to me."

Tweek was floored. He was so used to being called a murderous ghost he never thought anyone could think any differently of him. The demon of Stark's, some even went as far to call him. The Shadowman, a super hero? Well... he never thought of it that way.

Tweek couldn't resist cracking another small smile under his bandana. He did that a lot around Tricia.

"Yeah, I guess it kinda does, doesn't it?"

The little girl had already fallen fast asleep in a mound of blankets and Beanie Babies. His eyes went half lidded as his gloved hand reached out to gently pat her shoulder.

"I'll find him," he muttered. "I promise you."

...

For the next few days Kyle's mind was occupied only with Shadowman, his creepy little house in the woods, and the tortured little boy attached to him. The foggy mystery their very existence embodied puzzled and intrigued him more than anything ever had before. The nightmares Kyle still received in his dreams didn't help matters. He'd gotten barely any sleep and even less homework done than he'd like to admit to any of his teachers. He was losing his grip on things. Perfect little Mr. Top-in-class was slipping.

Even as he sat in lunch with his friends peering curiously in his direction, all he could do was stare into space and wonder.

Tweek said in death spirits were stuck in the moment they died. If that really was true, what would explain Craig's grotesque appearance? Why did he swap sopping wet skin and lungs full of water for gaping eye holes and a dozen extra hands? It just didn't make any sense to him. Then again, most things about Craig didn't. Why were the children in the woods so attached to him? What exactly made him so much stronger than the average ghost?

Who drowned him, and why?

It was all too complicated. It was a mystery packed on top of a thousand others, but he was determined to solve them. That tangled web was proving hard to unravel. He'd read every article and watched every news broadcast about Craig and his disappearance, but all he discovered was a big heap of nothing. There wasn't even a single suspect to work with.

He looked up towards a table across the room. Tweek was sitting there alone. His sketchbook was out in front of him. His pencil scribbled along the paper as his lunch sat forgotten off to the side. He was probably doodling another cartoon Craig in a sweater. Kyle couldn't imagine what it must've felt like to be Tweek in all that mess.

"He looks lonely, doesn't he?" Butters asked, which snapped Kyle out of his trance. "He sits there by himself all the time. I think it's kind of sad."

Kyle nodded in agreement, but another member of their group wasn't quite as kind. Eric poked his head up to see who they were talking about, and the moment he recognized the table he scoffed.

"If he wasn't such a freak of nature people would probably sit with him," Eric dropped mindlessly.

"Hey, don't talk about him like that," Kyle snapped with his arms crossing. "Just because someone sits by themselves doesn't mean something's wrong with them."

"Oh, dude. I know for a fact something's wrong with him. Okay, so this one time- in middle school - I was just going about my own business in the hall. You know, like usual," Eric sputtered.

Kyle rolled his eyes. This was far from the first time he'd heard that exaggerated tale. He already knew where it was going before Cartman could even begin.

"It was a fine, usual day. Then I heard Tweek screaming. Dude he was freaking out on Clyde freaking OUT! It looked like he was about to punch him! So Clyde pushed him away, 'cause Tweek grabbed his shirt. Then, BOOM! All the lights blew out! All the lockers went flying open it's was like something off of Carrie!"

"Oh, come on," Kyle said while shaking his head and heaving an annoyed sigh.

"Don't believe me? Like half of our class was in the hallway when it happened. Oh, oh. Kenny was there, too! Tell 'em, Kenny!"

"One light blew out and a couple lockers slammed closed," Kenny corrected as he rested his chin in his hand. "It was scary but it wasn't like you make it out to be."

"Ey! Don't undermine me! It was right the way I told it!"

For some reason Kyle was starting to get defensive. Eric didn't have any idea of the terrible pain Tweek went through every day. Not that Kyle fully understood it yet, either, but God dammit he deserved respect. The again, Cartman wasn't just unwittingly insulting Kyle's new 'mentor', but also everything Kyle himself was.

Everything he was just gaining to courage to truly embrace.

"Even if that did all happen, who cares?" Kyle finally retorted before tossing his sandwich down onto his speckled tray. "Just because someone can do things you don't understand doesn't make them a freak."

Cartman raised his hands in startled defense. "Wow, chill out. I just told a story. It's no reason to get all pissy."

This only proved to further anger Kyle. He stood up from his chair, which let out a loud whine against the tile floor. His tray was snatched up off the table and into his hands before blurting, "Tweek isn't dangerous, and I'm gonna prove it."

Everyone watched in baffled silence as Kyle made off towards the lonely table across the lunch room.

"Wow!" Kenny shouted before running after him. "Wow, Ky, think and out what you're doin'. Just because Tweek won't Darth Vader choke you doesn't mean he wants you hanging around his table- the guys a grouch."

"I know he's a grouch," Kyle quickly replied. "But he's not what everybody says. He's not some

psychotic freak."

"And how are you so sure?" Kenny asked with a raised brow.

"We're friends!... kind of," he muttered in anxious reply.

"Since when?"

Kyle didn't say anything as he walked past tables packed with other students. Some casually watched him go, while others didn't seem to pay any mind at all. At least not until his tray hit the top of Tweek's table, and the twitchy blond jumped with a strangled sound. He looked up from a sketchbook laid out in front of him. He was in the relaxing process of designing another sweater when the sharp sound snapped him back into reality. His eyes were wide and petrified as he looked up at the person standing from across the table top.

Tweek blinked and anxiously licked his lips.

"Kyle? What are you doing?" He questioned.

"I'm sitting with you... Sorry, Kenny followed me."

Tweek's eyes slid up Kenny's form. He flipped his sketch book closed and set his pencil down on top of it. Straightening his jacket, he leaned forward to pick his sandwich back up from his bag. Kyle standing at the edge of the table almost didn't feel real. It was his middle school years since anyone just popped in for a table visit, so he was a bit spooked by the break in routine.

"Listen, thanks, but you can't sit here."

Kyle's face visibly fell.

"Well... why not?" Kyle grew a bit sad at Tweek's rejection. He hadn't expected to get brushed off quite so quickly, not after all they'd talked about in the woods that night.

Tweek's eyes slowly scanned the room to note all of the people silently watching. He knew those stares all too well.

"It's not good for you. If you sit with me, they'll treat you like me," Tweek replied as his then trembling fingers replaced his sandwich with a coffee thermos. He was so anxious he just kept putting down and picking up different things to give the illusion of being busy, but he did take a huge gulp from the bright and colorful container.

"I don't care how they treat me," Kyle replied, which took Tweek off guard. "You shouldn't be confined to this table alone just because they can't understand you."

Tweek blinked. He really didn't expect anything less from his new little leech. Tweek could fuss and argue all he wanted to, but Kyle always seemed to get his way. Just like out in the woods. He was a pest who didn't take no for an answer, though he was slowly becoming a welcomed annoyance. He was comparable to one of those really ugly dogs that slowly started looking less and less ugly the longer he stared at it.

"Um... alright," was all he could blurt in response.

Book Of The Dead

To say Tweek felt uncomfortable staying at the Tucker's house was the understatement of eternity.

He'd always be left there on the weekends his parents worked. Once upon a time he looked forward to those baby sitting days. Laura would take him and the Tucker siblings out to the park, cook them big meals, and when the night time came he and Craig would secretly stay up for hours while everyone else slept. They were fun days. Happy days.

But they weren't so happy without Craig.

His parents dropped him off that weekend just like any other. He tried to beg to stay home, but they wouldn't allow their then twelve year old to fend for himself. He tried to beg to go to Token's or Clyde's instead, but there was no getting out of it.

Every visit to the Tuckers' became a knife in his already gaping wounds. He could feel the tip of the blade dig in every time Laura answered the door instead of her son. It only stabbed in deeper when shouting siblings and the usually blaring stereo were replaced with forced conversation and silence. Then, as he'd pass by a door marked Craig's Room in blue marker, he'd feel the metal graze his heart.

He always clutched onto his stuffy turtle when he passed by it - as he took in the shiny padlock and it's metallic base bolted into the wood. Why exactly Mr. and Mrs. Tucker locked up Craig's door, Tweek wasn't sure. All he was sure of was the nasty look Craig's dad, Thomas, would give him if he was caught staring at it.

Thomas didn't like Tweek.

It was obvious just by the way the man stared at him from across the kitchen table. It was meal time, but the family ritual felt just as robotic and empty as everything else did. They each took their assigned seats and tried not to stare too long at the one left empty.

It was always the same.

Laura was already passing out plates when an odd creature took the seat beside Tweek. He hadn't even seen the shuttering thing come in. He just blinked, and Craig was there. It made him jump, but no one cared enough to take a note of it.

"Can you make another one?" Tweek asked as Laura placed his sloppy-Joe before him.

She cocked her brow at hearing that. Tweek Tweek asking for a second helping before he'd even started? The boy pecked at his food like a bird, especially lately.

"You must be really hungry asking for two sandwiches," she answered before standing up straight.

"Oh, it's not for me," Tweek said in a matter-of-fact tone. "It's for him."

He pointed to the chair beside him, which, of course, was empty. Thomas gave the child a confused look from across the table. A mouthful of ground beef sat idle between his teeth, and his sandwich was held aloft in his big hands.

"Oh, I see, I see," Laura replied after a moment of consideration. Imaginary friends weren't unusual. They they were almost necessary for little boys who's real best friends vanished off the face of the

planet. Laura thought she understood a situation she knew nothing about, so pressed forward. "Is he your friend?"

"Yes! My best friend, even if he's kind of floppy now," Tweek announced as he watched Craig plop off the seat beside him. "Oh, that's... wonderful. May I ask his name?"

Tweek's face suddenly fell. Blue eyes shifted anxiously as he tried not to stare at the eyeless figure that laid motionless in the floor beside him.

"I'm not allowed to tell you," he answered.

All that did, though, was peek Laura's interest. She turned from the kitchen table to walk back to the counter and make another sloppy-Joe for their invisible fifth dinner guest. She spooned the meat with a careful motion onto a hamburger bun. If Tweek's 'friend' wasn't going to eat it, someone else would, anyways.

"Can I know what he looks like?" she asked as she turned back to the table with plate in hand. "It's rude to have a guest for dinner and not even know that much."

Tweek rubbed the sauce off his lips, and Laura placed the sandwich on the table above a very startled and confused Craig. His head peeked up over the wooden edge as if he could stare at the meaty bun, despite not having any eyeballs.

"I..." Tweek froze up. Well... should he? His parents said he wasn't allowed to tell them he saw Craig. They never said he wasn't allowed to describe him. "He's kinda..."

He glanced back over at Craig to try to find a word to fit him. A weird crack came from the dead boy's neck when he leaned forward. His maw came wide open, and greenish, yellow puss dripped onto his untouched meal.

"Gross," Tweek finished with his nose scrunched up. That was a pretty good way to end his sentence.

Thomas watched him from across the table. The man's sandwich was abandoned on his paper plate as he wiped his hands on a napkin.

"And what makes him gross?" Laura asked after she took a seat.

Tweek felt like he'd become a spectacle. The whole family stared at him over their meals. Even little Tricia's eyes shifted between him and the empty chair beside him.

"Um... my mom says it's not polite to say," Tweek grumbled.

"That's fine, sweetie," Laura said. She leaned forward to rest her cheek on her hand. "You can still tell me, polite or not."

Well... in that case. "I think it's 'cause the big man hurt him!" Tweek blathered, "He was okay before that happened, so..."

"The big man?" Laura asked. "He hurt your friend?"

"Yeah. He pushed him under the water until he couldn't breathe anymore."

Where the hell did that come from? Now she was really worried. There were only two situations she knew of where little kids said such terrible things: They watched too many horror movies, or

they were being abused.

Tweek was too scared for horror movies.

Her husband seemed just as at a loss with what their tiny guest was telling them, but he didn't take it nearly as well. The table vibrated when his bouncing knee would knock into it, which Laura ignored.

"Why would the big man do something like that?" she asked.

"So my friend couldn't tell anyone," Tweek whimpered. By that time he'd forgotten all about his meal and his promise to his parents. Instead, he rung his hands together while the corpse beside him jerked and heaved.

"That's not a very nice thing to do," Laura commented with a frown on her face. "What wasn't he supposed to tell?"

Craig tipped his cavernous maw back with a squeal. One of his rickety little hands tried to reach up and cover Tweek's mouth, but the boy knocked it away.

"I don't want to talk about Craig anymore," he said.

The table fell into silence as he picked up his lunch and shoved it into his mouth. The remaining Tuckers were shell shocked, with the exception of little Tricia, who didn't know what was happening.

"What did you say?" Laura asked as if she hadn't heard him.

A scream was still pouring out of the bloody mouth beside him, so Tweek said nothing. It was hard to hear her voice over the obnoxious sound, anyway. That was another good word to describe Craig: Obnoxious.

Tweek chewed his sandwich and thought of other words to describe Craig as the Tuckers left their food untouched. Laura looked at Thomas. He continued with his meal to avoid the topic.

The whole rest of Tweek's visit was that way. The grown ups were even more silent than usual and the stares they'd give him as they walked through the living room made him nervous. Especially when he'd realized what he did. **DON'T EVER MENTION CRAIG IN FRONT OF THE TUCKERS**, his parents reminded him before every visit. He suspected they'd rather him not mention Craig to anyone at all.

Yet, there he was, ringing his hands together again. He'd said something bad, and the Tuckers' weren't speaking to him because they were angry. He was sure of that. Even the colorful cartoons flicking across the television couldn't distract him from it. What if Craig's mom and dad told on him?

He couldn't imagine the trouble he'd be in if his parents found out. Each tick of the wall clock was another second closer to his inevitable doom. That was his thinking when Mr. Tucker's heavy footsteps stopped beside the couch. Without even so much as a glance in Tweek's direction, the man uttered, "C'mon. Parents are here."

Oh, no.

He swallowed down spit that collected in the back of his throat, and Craig crawled on the ceiling above him as he moved across the room.

"Bye, Tweek!" Tricia said with an ecstatic wave. He would have bid farewell just as happily if he wasn't about to be beheaded. God, would he end up crawling up walls and puking black stuff like Craig?

Tweek followed Thomas through the kitchen at a distance. He was just as scared of the man as he was of his punishment. Thomas was never mean, no. He never had been, but a lot of things changed after Craig left.

Thomas's hand landed on the door knob, but he did not open it. Instead, he turned to face the little boy. Tweek clutched his stuffy turtle, just as he always did. His eyes were big and he was gnawing on his bottom lip.

After a short moment Thomas muttered, "don't say anything like that again."

This took Tweek by surprise. Thomas was a quiet fellow. Someone who was always there, just passively watching the world go by around him. He never interfered unless Laura prompted him to. Until that day, anyway.

"Like what?" Tweek asked with a quiver, though he was pretty sure he knew what.

Thomas narrowed his eyes.

"Don't go telling your ghost stories. Especially not around here."

Tweek swallowed and took a small step back. Thomas's voice was even lower than usual, which did make him sound mean. If Craig's dad was that mad, he could only imagine how angry his parents would be.

With his eyes still locked onto the boy, he pulled the side door open. Tweek ran onto the grass as fast as he could, but slowed when he saw his parents' green grand prix idling in the drive. Oh, god. They were gonna skin him. Skin him and leave him out in the woods for the bugs to eat, like the meaty man by the train tracks. He steadied his breath and tugged hard on the leg of his stuffy turtle for support. Then, he took baby steps towards the car.

The driver's side window rolled down, revealing the woman behind the wheel.

"So," his mother said. Tweek closed his eyes and prepared himself to be yelled at. "Did you have a good time at the Tuckers?"

He opened them again.

"Um... yes?"

"Ah, that's good honey. See, it wasn't the end of the world, now was it?"

With a startled blink, he rubbed the aching in his chest. Mrs. and Mr. Tucker didn't tell.

...

Kyle's eyes cracked open to the sunlight pouring into his room in beams. He slowly sat up and rubbed at his sleepies, then slipped out of his bed. Today was different than the rest. Usually on a Saturday morning he'd be sleeping in before spending the rest of his lazy day in front of the television with homework in his lap. Not that Saturday. He had other plans.

He was pulling a pair of pants on when he gazed out his window. He noticed his neighbor was

doing the same, though she probably had trouble seeing without face. The living neighbors had long since abandoned their home. They left it to chip and whither away, much like Tweek's house out in the woods. There was, however, one occupant who was left behind.

That faceless girl at the window.

He stumbled across the room with his pants half on to close the blinds, then finished preparing himself. He didn't need to bring much, except for his questions. He was only going a couple blocks away. He stuffed his feet into his favorite sneakers, and then they hit the sidewalk.

As he tracked across town alongside the rising sun, he tried his best to keep his head straight and his eyes from wandering. There was no guarantee he'd look up to catch mutilated faces peering at him, but there was also no guarantee he wouldn't.

The sun was still just barely peeking over mountaintops when the familiar bell rang over Kyle's head. There was no one in the shop. Even the counter was abandoned. The only exception was the shadow in the booth farthest from the door. Kyle swallowed down his spit and rubbed his hands together as he approached. The figure was hard at work on something, and Kyle knew what it was.

A metal hook rubbed against cloth as it kept to its diligent work. Thick strings ran over fingers and air pushed in a relaxed rhythm from lungs. This, for Tweek, was the most relaxing therapy. The strings weaved together at the tip of a hook and his fingers. This left the beginnings of a new yarn sweater in their wake. Of course, the tiny hands hiding under his chair crept up to touch it. Their shaking appendages left messes, but it was Craig's sweater anyway. He could do whatever he wanted with it.

"Tweek?" Someone uttered from nearby. Tweek jumped and let out a tiny, startled sound. Limbs unfurled from underneath his booth to either comfort or protect the Shadowman, but Kyle wasn't sure which.

"Oh, sorry," Kyle said for the thousandth time. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Tweek waved it away before gesturing for the other to sit across from him. Kyle waddled around the table, smoothed down the front of his green sweater, and slid into the booth. He kept his feet tucked up under his seat to avoid the tiny demon hiding nearby. This was indeed an odd arrangement, but Tweek wanted him there. At least, that's what he said the day before during English class.

"Come to the coffee shop if you want to talk to me so bad," he said. "Tomorrow morning."

Well, there Kyle was. Sitting in a rather uncomfortable booth and watching Tweek crochet. He was content with that. This was the first time they'd encountered each other because Tweek wanted to. Despite that, Tweek's hands were shaking. Shaking terribly. "

You know, you're a lot different when you aren't at Stark's," Kyle commented over the table.

"O-oh?" Tweek stuttered as he completed another yarn row. "Why's that?"

"Well," Kyle began before sitting forward. "You're so calculated and focused out there. It's kind of hard to believe you're the same person, watching you fidget."

It was kind of weird that Kyle noticed those kind of things, but everything about Kyle was weird.

"That's cause the pond is different. I trust it," Tweek admitted with his eyes narrowing slightly.

"You trust the one place that hurts you most?" Kyle asked. Tweek had to stop crocheting a moment. That question took a lot of brain power to even make sense of.

"I didn't ask you to come here to drill me about my personal preferences," Tweek grumbled.

"Then why did you?"

Tweek set his sweater on the table and ran his hands together.

"I have something for you."

Kyle cocked a brow. A gift was the last thing he'd expected. Then again, he wasn't sure what to expect at all when it came to Tweek.

"Yeah? What is it?"

Tweek reached down for the tote bag sitting on the floor beside his seat. It was stuffed with yarn, knitting needles, crochet hooks, and other crafts. Out from the bag, though, came something much less inviting. It was a composition book. The kind they often used in their classes to keep track of notes in. There was something more sinister about the one in Tweek's hand.

Tweek set it on the table and slid it forward. With weary hands, Kyle reached across the table and pulled the book before him. There was nothing written on the blank lines of the front cover to indicate just what he had. There was only a gaudy white and black pattern straining his eyes. Confused, he opened to the first page. It read:

KINDS 1. Shadowpeople 2. The ones who live under the stairs 3. Craigs 4. The animal people 5. Crying babies and why they're evil 6. Mangles 7. Oculus

The odd list continued for the next two pages before breaking away into the actual content. A table of contents perhaps? The first page was about shadowpeople, which Kyle found ironic. The header was scribbled in with black pen, followed with an unsettling example; a pen drawing of a black silhouette with inked red eyes. It was grinning. He flipped the page, where he found a description and how dangerous they are, among other things.

"Wow... is this all for real?" Kyle asked as his bare palm ran over the paper. There were many pictures in that book, each followed by invaluable information he only wished he had in his hands sooner.

Tweek nodded. "I started it so I wouldn't forget things. So they couldn't sneak up on me. It's far from finished, but I have a new one now."

"So... this is mine?" Kyle pondered.

"If you want it."

"Of course I want it," Kyle replied as he flipped back to the first page. His eyes scanned over the crude table of contents as if each numbered bullet held a secret. "Though... I don't really understand why you're doing this."

Tweek wouldn't admit that maybe he was the smallest bit worried about Kyle. If that prick decided to go headfirst into something and wound up getting hurt again, well... Tweek would feel at least a little responsible. Besides, Tweek knew his life wasn't guaranteed. If he joined Craig too soon, at least Kyle wouldn't be left completely alone and empty handed.

Tweek went back to his sweater as Kyle mulled over the ink stained pages. He was in awe by the vast number of "kinds" Tweek had documented in that book. From small orbs to massive creatures Kyle never heard of before. Every entry seemed to be missing scraps of information. Kyle looked up to the person across from him, and then allowed his feet to touch the floor. A tiny, stray hand twisted around his ankle the moment sole hit linoleum. It made him jump, but he didn't yank away as it wrapped around his pant leg like a vine.

"I haven't seen barely any of these things," he muttered with a cough. "Did you actually come across all of them? How did you find out so much?"

Tweek's fingers kept working as if he were a loom rather than a person. He would only stop to occasionally look past Kyle. Like he was sizing up an invisible person standing behind him. "I haven't seen them all. Not yet. And, well... Craig isn't my only friend."

That was somewhat ominous, but Kyle believed it. Tweek embraced his abilities a long time ago. It only make sense that he'd built relationships with some of the dead. It only make sense that they would tell him things. It didn't make it any less creepy.

Kyle jumped when the bell above the coffee shop door rang. A flock of black clad teens slithered their way in, stopping to take notice of him. Tweek nodded his head and gave an unenthusiastic wave to the Gothic gaggle. They all nodded their heads in the same beat before creeping over to the counter. Henrietta pounded the service bell with her fishnet covered fist. Kyle wrinkled up his nose, and he suddenly realized he preferred the icy cold grip around his leg over the Goths sneers any day.

"Ignore them," Tweek uttered as he returned to the project in his lap. "They seem intimidating, but they aren't different than anyone else."

Kyle nodded and tried not to stare as they placed their order to Tweek's mother and took their usual seats across the shop. Kyle flipped through a couple more pages of his new encyclopedia before pushing it aside. He would have set it in his lap, but he was scared Craig might get curious and snatch it.

"So, how have you been holding up?" Kyle pondered. "Find anything?"

"Found anything? If I had I wouldn't b-be sitting here wasting my time on you, now would I? "

Ah. There he was. The snippy asshole Kyle knew.

"Hm. I suppose not," Kyle replied without missing a beat. He then cleared his throat. "Is there anything you could, um... make him let go of me?"

Kyle shuffled his shoe against the hard floor beneath them, but Craig's stray arm wouldn't untangle itself from his ankle. It felt more like the grip of a boa than a dead boy's fingers. Tweek looked at Kyle for a moment before he finally understood what was being asked of him.

He sat his sweater back onto the table before discreetly tapping on his knees. Craig's head cocked up at the familiar sound, and soon his hands found a better use or themselves than tormenting Kyle. They slid across the floor and felt for Tweek's knees. They gripped the edge of the table and pushed the dead boy up into his companion's lap.

Kyle got an eyeful of the twitching mess of limbs feeling all over Tweek. The rotting caverns in Craig's face were forever unsettling. He could hardly stare into them without his hair turning white. Tweek leaned forward into his pint sized companion. The tiny monster hummed and

encased the other's middle in it's arms. The contented murmur only deepened the look of sadness on Tweek's face.

"We all die. Every one of us. Doesn't matter if you're innocent. Doesn't matter if you're a child. The maggots still get you," Tweek said with a small scoff. "It's hardly fair, is it?"

"No," Kyle agreed with a far off look in his eyes, "it isn't."

"Yeah, you'd understand, wouldn't you?" Tweek asked. For the first time he didn't sound sarcastic or mean spirited. He seemed to truly understand the lackluster look in his newest companion's expression. This made Kyle look away. He didn't like being read so easily.

"For life to end before it even begins," Tweek uttered. Despite the audience of Goths, Tweek set his palm atop Craig's dingy hat. The creature let out a bubbly, distorted purr, but it didn't seem to make Tweek feel any better. "Then to get stuck like this."

Kyle's eyes went half lidded in thought. "Maybe... maybe some things are like the movies. Maybe if we figured out how he died he could move on and all that."

"If that's the case it'd be the only thing movies got right."

"Yeah." Kyle managed a small quirk of his lip. "But why else would he be showing us things? Like him drowning? He's giving us pieces of the puzzle for a reason."

Tweek's gaze shifted out the window and onto main street. The week day morning rush was nonexistent on weekends. Only few cars passed by, and even fewer crossed paths with the shop on foot. None of them came in.

"That'd make sense," Tweek agreed as Craig's hands plucked at the buttons on his shirt. "But nothing's ever that easy."

"Tweek, honey," A light voice called from the counter. Both boys jumped at the unexpected voice, and glanced towards it with wide eyes. "Would you be a dear and help me clean in the stock room when you've finished with your little friend?"

With a slow sigh, Tweek began to pack up his yarn. His mother smiled wide before saying, "Oh, thank you, sweetie."

"Yeah, yeah," Tweek muttered. Kyle blinked, and Craig was gone. Spindly arms and grizzly face, gone with a flutter of his eyelid. Tweek heaved his tote bag over his shoulder and stood.

"Well," he uttered. "See ya later, I guess."

Kyle nodded in reply. Tweek's gaze shifted to the invisible man behind Kyle once again. After he took a good, long eyeful, he turned to walk away. Kyle slowly turned to peek behind him. Nothing. There was nothing there. Why was Tweek so persistent to stare at the walls behind him? Surely he wasn't really seeing something. If he was, Kyle would see it too... right?

That uneasy feeling returned to him, so he snatched up his things. The bell rang over his head just moments before he took off down the sidewalk. Then it rang again. He snapped his head back to see a group dressed in black had stepped out behind him. No matter how much he disliked the Goths, it was a relief seeing flesh and blood.

He clutched his new book a little tighter and headed for home. He walked along a long stretch of sidewalk, and then his sneakers veered him left. The flock's black combat boots did the same. He

walked across Main Street and headed towards suburbia. So did they. He contemplated taking off into a sprint. Surely they wouldn't chase after him, but his curiosity was yet again getting the better of him. And so he slowed with the hope they would just walk past and leave him in peace.

And they did.

The flock split apart down the middle and reformed ahead of him. A small chuckle slipped past his lips. He'd been hanging out with Tweek too much. He was catching his paranoia. It was then, as he was humoring himself with relief, they stopped in his way.

"Um..." he muttered when all four turned to face him. He took a step to the side, but the youngest goth blocked him from circling around. He was trapped in a standoff.

"Can... I help you?" Kyle asked. He clutched his new book tightly to his chest. He didn't know what they were after, but that book was something he planned to guard with his life.

"What are you doing hanging around Spooks?" asked the tallest of them. It was a boy Kyle remembered as Michael. At least he thought so.

"Spooks?" Kyle questioned with a brow raised. "You mean Tweek?"

Michael nodded his head.

"Oh... he's a friend of mine, that's all."

"I doubt it. Spooks doesn't hang around with your type."

His type? What did that mean?

"Well... not at first, no. But we are friends! He's the one who invited me to the shop-"

"Listen here, you peppy little shit," the smallest, Firkle, barked. "We don't know what you're up to, but Spooks is one of us. You hurt him, and we'll make you wish you were never fucking born."

Kyle blinked. It made sense now. Tweek sitting with them at the shop. Their angry, leery stares. They were watching after him. Protecting him from the kind of people who isolated him. The jocks. The dogooders. People like Kyle.

"I'm not going to hurt him," Kyle assured as he clutched the book. If he held it any tighter it would be busting into his ribcage. "He's my friend."

"Sure, your friend," Henrietta snickered as if he didn't know the meaning of the word.

"Just know we're watching," Pete said before jerking his head to flip his red-streaked hair. And, with that, the flock broke off of his path.

...

The next few days for Kyle were like a swift blur. He didn't do much of his homework. He didn't spend his dinners with his family, and his group of friends were short a member. He spent all that time alone. Alone in his room reading a book.

That day was no different. His family was conveniently out that night. He didn't even remember why or where they had gone. He was ecstatic just to hear they'd be leaving him in peace. He sat up shop on the kitchen table. Tweek's composition book open on one side, his folder of notes open on the other. The honor roll student in him was taking over. He got out his pen and again began to

read.

Oculus read the title.

He swallowed hard before running his hand over the scribbled text. The word he had been written all along the margins and blank spaces of the paper, adding just an extra touch of fucking creepy.

A rarity. They're flesh and blood people born with connections to the other side. Clairvoyants is what the living call them. The dead call them the Oculus.

Most Oculus are born. Others are made later in life, most often through trauma, though this is even less common. The child Oculus is at risk of possession or "accidental" deaths, usually caused by Shadowpeople. The teenage Oculus isn't as likely to have these problems with spirits, but their suicide risk is high.

Kyle copied everything that seemed wildly important into his notebook, being sure to expand on it if he could. This entry was more important than all the others.

This entry was about him.

Oculus see the world differently because of their eyes.

Kyle reached up and let the tip of his fingers brush along his eyelid.

I wonder if it'd go away if I ripped them out.

Kyle frowned.

"Or if I cut my hands off," he muttered in reply.

A sound startled Kyle out of his reading. It was loud, sudden, and booming. Someone was knocking on the front door. Kyle stood up from the kitchen chair and shuffled across the floor. He timidly poked his head into the living room, where he watched the door vibrate against someone's fist. With a gulp, he willed himself to slink to the door and peek out the peep hole. There was a tall, black figure on his doorstep. He unhooked the chain and pulled the door open. The cold wafted in along with the black shadow. It stood out like a muddy stain as it leaned against the living room wall to catch its breath.

"Kyle," said the figure as it heaved through its teeth. Tweek doubled over against the door frame. He was gripping his chest, trying his best to steady his breathing.

"Holy shit, are you okay?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah," he heaved. "I... I need your help."

That was shocking.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I was out in the woods," Tweek replied as he slipped into the living room. "I found something. Finally, I found something."

Kyle blinked, and then closed the door to ward away the darkness outside it. "Found something? Found what, exactly?"

Tweek slipped his backpack off his shoulders. The zipper snagged and he fought with it before

yanking it open. From it, Tweek eased out a plastic grocery sack. It was white, tattered, and caked with dirt. Globbs of the mess cascaded down onto the Broflovski's living room carpet. Kyle stepped forward to get a better look at the plastic bundle, and Tweek clutched it in his gloved hands.

"What is that?" Kyle asked.

"You get visions, right? When you touch things?" he blurted. "I need you to tell me who this belonged to- what happened, I need to know."

"I... I want to help you! But I can't control it. It just kind of happens whenever it wants to."

"Okay, okay, but I need you to try. Here, just- just-"

Tweek's nails scraped along the plastic bag until they ripped a fresh hole in it. The bag stretched open, and a weird stench wafted from it. The smell was earthy and damp. He stripped the plastic away from the cloth it had been protecting. It was a T-shirt. Kyle thought it might have been green, but it was so slathered in muck and dark blotches he could hardly tell.

"Wow, shit," Kyle sputtered. "Is that blood?!"

Kyle stepped closer to get a better look. Tweek pulled it open by its shoulders, which showcased just how drenched it had been in body fluids. At least that's what the crusty brown blotches appeared to be.

Tweek's usually callous behavior shifted. His blue eyes became watery and his lips twisted into a disgusted and anguished sneer.

"L-look how little it is," he commented as he struggled to keep the ragged cloth on display.

Kyle felt his heart melt away. Tweek. The cold, calculating Shadowman. He was standing there before Kyle, holding back tears as he clutched the bloody little cloth. Whoever it belonged to, they were only a child.

Kyle wanted to help. He wanted to reach out and take the shirt between his fingers. Receive a vision that could tell them everything. However, he had become so accustomed to trying to avoid those things he wasn't sure if he should.

Usually his visions were accidents. He'd pick up a pot only to hear a conversation his mother had while she was holding it. He'd lean against a barrel to see a child was once hiding for their lives inside it. He'd grab a friend's back pack to discover their uncle loved them in a way no man should love a nephew. He did not want those visions.

He did not want to know the stories his hands told him.

But Craig.

This could help Craig, and that's what he was trying to strive for. Kyle nibbled hard on his lip in consideration. He was always begging Tweek to accept his help, he couldn't get cold feet now.

The very tips of his fingers pressed into the cloth. Yes. It was teeming with visions. Kyle could literally feel them pulsing through his finger bones. With eyes slammed closed and an unsure inhale, he tightly gripped it in his fist. His breath became more rapid, and when his eyes twitched open there was no pupil or iris to be seen. Only a white sheen and the red veins of the back of his eyes. His mouth fell slightly open, though he didn't let out even a squeak.

Fresh tears leaked out from behind Ky's rolled eyes. They spilled down his face as his jaw quivered open. Voices spilled out in murmurs though he never moved his lips. It was like an orphanage inside his mouth. Children spoke over the rows of desks that were his teeth, and their sounds seeped out of the window that was his mouth. The fist clutching the cloth began shaking like a tuning fork, and a trickle of blood ran down from his nostril.

He wasn't lying or trying to pull Tweek's leg. He and his abilities were all too real to the then panicking Shadowman. To him, it looked more like a seizure than a vision.

He tightened his grip on the tattered cloth, and with a hard, swift yank, he tore it away from Kyle's killer grip. Kyle blinked, and his pupils returned to him. His hands were still shaking. He didn't bother to try and wipe the blood from his nose.

"Holy fuck, are you okay?" Tweek asked. "What did you see?"

Kyle let out a choked gasp before covering his mouth and shaking his head. He couldn't. He wouldn't say it. He turned and walked to the couch, where he sat on the very edge of a cushion. He used his sleeve to wipe away the bloody mess he felt gushing from his nose. Tweek watched all the while, both curious and concerned.

"Did you see him? Did you see Craig?" he coaxed.

Kyle took a long, steadying inhale before jerking his head 'no'. Tweek couldn't hide the disappointment on his face.

"Then what was it?" he asked.

"What do you know about the boys in the woods?"

Tweek's eyebrows raised.

"The blond ones who play with Craig. Do you know anything about them?" Kyle continued. He stuffed his hands between his knees to keep them from trembling.

Tweek swallowed. No. No, actually. He didn't know anything about them. They never tried to talk to him, and he never bothered enough to wonder about them. They were just dead kids Craig liked to play with. That was all.

"No," Tweek admitted. "Nothing. Why? What did you see?"

"One of them," Kyle said.

Tar Is Thicker

Kyle would hate to admit how easily he fell asleep that night. He should have been so overwhelmed with emotion that sleep was impossible. He should have been up worrying about Stan.

The words he spat in his best friend's face were venomous and nasty. He should have been mourning the taste of them on his tongue. He should have been, but he wasn't. Despite the fact that only hours earlier his throat had ached from how much he'd been screaming; he fell easily into sleep.

His dreams were even peaceful that night, but peaceful was not what he felt when he awoke from them. He felt a kick in his chest. As if an old boot jammed right into his ribs, he sucked in heavy breaths. His hands frantically grabbed at his sheets as if to make sure they were real. His room was filled with such darkness he was still blind when he opened his eyes. Despite this. Despite the darkness and the tears blurring his groggy vision, he saw someone standing at the edge of his bed.

The form stood completely still as it looked down at him. His skin shivered. The thought that this figure could be something otherworldly terrified him at first, but that fear subsided when he realized who it was.

"Stan?" He croaked out in a whisper. Tears collected in the corners of his eyes, but a smile spread across his face. "God. I'm so glad you came back."

Kyle closed his eyes and sucked in a steadying breath.

"I was so worried," Kyle muttered. "You know I didn't mean anything I said, right?"

Stan didn't reply.

"I mean... I do think you need to get help, but... I shouldn't have said all the awful things I did."

The figure stood up straight and swayed out of his view. He blinked, and then sat up to follow it.

"Stan?" He questioned, louder that time.

There was no one with him. Confused, he stumbled out of bed and looked around his room.

Only then did he notice there were bright lights shining in from his window. They flashed blue and red, and were accompanied by an alarmingly loud screech of a siren. How had he not heard it before?

He wasn't relieved anymore. Now, he was terrified.

He forced his shaking legs to move, and the world melted and crashed down as he ran through it. It felt like the hallway walls were shaking. Like the living room rafters above him were caving in. The commotion outside only worsened his vertigo. There were people screaming. People crying. That one distant siren was the only steady sound.

His parents were standing by the front door. His little brother Ike stood behind them, trying to get a better view of the chaos outside.

"What's going on?" Kyle demanded breathlessly. His head was buzzing with agony. His chest felt

hollow, but caving in.

His mother and father turned back to him. Their faces looked just as clueless as his own.

"Not sure," his dad replied. "Just woke up a few minutes ago to all this. I think something happened down by the tracks."

Kyle pushed his way past them and stumbled out into the front yard. The grass felt wet under his bare feet. The cool feeling only added to the chill running up his spine.

There was more than just one cop car. There were three- four, maybe. The commotion lead down the street, where a crowd of onlookers managed to gather. His mom yelled for him to stay on the lawn, but he was already running down the sidewalk.

Families watched from their porches as Kyle went running, still in his pajamas, towards the mess of cops and civilians.

He wasn't prepared for what he would find beyond it.

Amidst the crying people and rushing EMTs there was a car. It was hard to recognize at first considering the train twisted and crushed it like a tin can. Once he spotted the black pin stripes amidst the scratched, red paint, though, there was no denying what he was seeing.

"No!" cracked out of his throat. He found himself running. His bare feet slammed against asphalt. Words tore from his throat in a shrill scream, words he didn't realize were even coming from him.

The yellow police line felt like a rip in reality. Everything beyond it was a terrible nightmare, but he couldn't stop himself from fisting it in his hand.

"Cartman! Cartman, get him! Get Kyle!" Someone shouted. Kyle barely even recognized his own name, let alone the arms that were suddenly encasing him. His fist tightened on the tape, but the pathetic strip of plastic snapped and fell miserably to the pavement as Kyle was dragged away.

He kicked and struggled as he was lifted off the ground. His voice cracked and rasped in a nearly inhuman tone as he fought to be let free. As he fought to make it to that warped mess of a truck and his friend who'd been inside of it.

"Don't let him see this!" ordered the same voice. It was closer now, close enough for the tattered orange parka to register in Kyle's frantic mind.

"What the fuck do you want me to do?" Cartman spat as he struggled not to let Kyle any closer to the carnage.

"Get him inside! Get him the fuck inside!"

Cartman obliged, trying his best to drag his flailing friend away.

"Let me go!" Kyle cried in desperation. "I have to get to him! Please!"

"I'm so sorry," Kenny said through the tightness in his jaw.

"No!" Kyle choked out as the twisted metal and crying neighbors got farther and farther away. As he got farther and farther away. Kyle beat his fists on Eric's shoulders, but he was too warn to struggle from the tight grip. With all the air left in his heaving lungs, he let out one more shrill scream.

"Stan!"

...

They remained in silence as Kyle sat on the edge of his mother's couch. Tweek was waiting for him to talk. Kyle knew that. He was waiting to hear about the things Kyle saw behind his eyes. He didn't want to tell him, though. He didn't ever want to tell anyone. The pictures were still flashing in his brain. The screams. The heavy breath.

It sunk into his flesh and left him feeling filthy.

His green eyes lifted up to meet with Tweek's. Tweek frowned at the water in them. Had this been a mistake?

"Are you okay?" Tweek asked. Kyle rubbed his hands together before his gaze flicked back down to the floor.

"No."

"What did you see?" Tweek pushed.

This time he wasn't pushing Kyle for Craig's sake. He was asking because he was getting worried.

"I can't...", was all Kyle would say.

He leaned forward and ran his fingers through his hair. His chest felt so heavy. His stomach was twisting and churning, leaving him feeling sick.

"I... I'm gonna-"

He gagged before jolting out of his seat and taking off through the kitchen.

Tweek worriedly hurried after him as he threw open the bathroom door. Kyle didn't even make it to the toilet before his lunch gushed out of his throat and into his mouth. He slammed his hands against the porcelain of the sink and heaved. Discolored ooze and bile spilled out of him like a broken sewer pipe. Tweek took a startled step forward to pull back Kyle's flaming red mop.

His nose turned up at the sharp smell of stomach acid.

Vomit didn't faze him anymore. Witnessing Kyle so shaken did.

Whatever Tweek made him see, it must have been disgusting.

When his stomach was empty and his throat was too sore to gag, he finally turned on the tap to wash his face. Tweek let his hair fall back into place, and Kyle stood straight. Rigid and gasping.

"I... I'm sorry," Tweek apologized as he took a step away. "I shouldn't have made you-..."

Kyle shook his head. This wasn't going to be another thing for Tweek to be guilt-ridden about.

"It was my decision," Kyle whispered.

Tweek looked around the bathroom to distract himself from the stone weighing down his chest. There were little fish painted on blue walls, and a yellow rubber duck was perched on the edge of the bathtub. A toilet was nearby. A tiny person sat atop it. It was a familiar little figure that was clawing at the insides of his eye sockets.

"Craig, don't do that," Tweek hissed before leaving Kyle's side.

His knees sank into the fluffy blue rug adorning the toilet. Craig let out a whine when Tweek captured his bruised wrists and pulled them away from his face.

"Don't dig at your eyes," Tweek clarified, though he sounded sad more than he did angry.

Kyle frowned when Tweek undid his bandana to use as a handkerchief. Craig was back to making distressed sounds when the cloth wiped away at the blood that gushed from his sockets.

"Is he okay?" Kyle pondered.

Tweek's lips were tight, but he shrugged in response.

"He picks at the insides on his eyes sometimes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He starts to cry if he does it too long, so I try to stop him when I see him doing it."

Kyle didn't say anything else. He just watched as Tweek held Craig's hands against his chest. Their pointed tips would be ripping at the inside of his head otherwise, but Craig didn't seem too happy with the arrangement. He made gurgling whines. With each one Tweek's face twisted a little more with despair.

"I'm sorry," he choked out. Kyle couldn't tell if he was speaking to him or Craig. Tweek's mouth became a wobbling line, and he looked at Craig's hands as he squeezed them.

The heaviness of his breath gave him away. Tweek was close to tears. He was so sure he was about to take a step closer to ending all this pain. That little bundle was supposed to be a key to unlocking a truth he'd been clawing towards for years.

That shirt could have very well been his last chance. Not only did it have nothing to do with Craig, but it made Kyle so scared he threw up.

He was quickly losing faith in himself.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, his head falling forward against Craig's grimy white shirt.

Multiple pairs of hands reached out to rub his back. Pet his hair. Wipe his eyes. The ones attached to the little creature's shoulders escaped from Tweek's grip. They slid around his neck and patted him on the head.

Craig was smiling wide. Kyle wasn't though. His face had morphed into a frown.

"What's wrong?" he gained the courage to ask.

"Winter's coming," Tweek spat.

"So?"

"So? I only have a month left before the ground gets hard and I can't dig anymore. Another fucking year. Another year. Nothing. I have nothing!"

Tweek squeezed Craig a little tighter, which the little ghost didn't mind. He just kept patting and smiling as his wriggling arms investigated Kyle's shower curtains and toilet paper rolls. They

seemed to have minds of their own most times.

A peculiar hand seemed very interested in Kyle. It wobbled away from the body it was attached to so it could grab a hold of his pajama shirt. It looked smaller than the ones Craig was raking through Tweek's wild hair. Much smaller. There was something else about it that left Kyle's stomach churning again.

Something that made his head buzz and his eyes go foggy. Afraid of another vision invading his mind, he jerked away from the hand.

"I don't know if it will help, but I'll tell you," Kyle whispered.

"Tell me what?" Tweek whimpered. "About the shirt?"

Kyle nodded. His eyes fogged over and he bit hard on his bottom lip.

"You don't have to."

"I want to."

A quivering breath fell out of Tweek's mouth. He nodded, his head nudging Craig's chilly ribs as he did.

"There was a... boy," Kyle muttered from his tight jaw. "Not Craig; he was blond. But..."

Tweek sluggishly pulled his face away from Craig to gaze up at Kyle, who was fidgeting with his pajama sleeve.

"He was in a room. I think the walls were made of...stone?" Kyle scrunched up his nose a little, and then wrapped his arms around himself. "Someone was... hurting him."

What that sentence insinuated made Tweek's jaw tighten with rage. Hurting him? He wanted to ask what Kyle meant, but he already knew. He knew. He could see it in the venerable, defiled look on Kyle's face. It was the same quiet pain Craig died in.

Tweek shivered. His face was still a little damp, but he dared not move to wipe it away. He felt the smallest twitch could send Kyle back to the sink. He was looking green.

"It wasn't Craig," Kyle felt he needed to repeat, "but he's dead."

"How do you know?"

"I saw it happen. He was cut into pieces while he... he was still alive." Kyle choked a little on those words.

Tweek swallowed a wad of spit that was building in the back of his throat, but regretted it. Now his mouth felt so dry his tongue was sticking to his teeth.

Kyle was in worse shape. He scratched at his arm through his sleeve to try and kill the tiny spiders trickling through his flesh. There was long silence between each bit of information he gave, like he had to prepare himself to speak of such evil.

"He got put in a red duffle bag. There were stones in the bottom and- and somebody threw him in the water."

"The water at Stark's?"

"I don't know. Most likely."

"Thomas," said a small, echoing voice followed by a quiet chortle.

Tweek jerked in surprise and gawked at Craig, who was kicking his feet and smiling.

"Did you say that?" Tweek asked in shock. Craig was a spirit of few words, and when he did speak it was hard to decipher. His voice was an echoing chorus of many. That time, though, he spoke with only one. One clear and childlike voice.

"That was Thomas," Craig replied, still grinning.

"Who is Thomas?" Tweek questioned as gently as he could.

Craig's voices reunited into a chorus to chime one eerily low reply.

"One of us," spilled from his clumsy and stiff lips.

Kyle and Tweek looked at one another with wide, confused eyes.

"What is he talking about?" Tweek asked, as if Kyle somehow had an answer.

The Shadowman was at a loss for words, so Kyle took a small step forward. He rubbed his sweating hands against his pajama pants and swallowed hard.

"Craig?" he called nervously.

The boy's neck cracked and snapped when he turned to face the voice speaking to him. Kyle held his breath for a moment as he took in the gaping caverns of black where eyes should have been. They were oozing again. Black grime tricked down Craig's cheeks as his jerking head tilted from side to side.

"Craig, how many are there? How many are with you?" Tweek's brows furrowed at the question, but Craig's smile grew wider.

"Six," came Kyle's shuttering answer.

"Wait," Tweek breathed. "Six? What's that mean?"

"I think that... Craig is more than one spirit."

"That isn't possible."

"Why not?" Kyle argued. "I mean, you said if one person dies a certain way then they remain that way forever, right? Well... Well what if a lot of people die the same way?"

They both turned their attention back to the little boy sitting on the toilet. His feet were still kicking and a smile was still lingering on his chapped lips.

He was humming, happy as could be.

"I'm not sure," Tweek admitted. "But I know who I can ask."

...

Tweek threw his backpack on the ground and let out a heavy huff. He rubbed his forehead and

squinted his eyes into the dark of his room. Perfect, just like he wanted it. Craig followed behind at an unsure pace as his companion slipped off his black over coat and tossed the messy thing onto his bed. Craig let out a low whine when Tweek slicked his hair back with his hand and made his way to the far corner of his room. The corner which harbored the attic.

Tweek almost thought he could hear Craig cry out for him to stop. It was always that way. If there was one person Craig hated more than anything it was the man in the attic. Though Tweek couldn't say that he blamed him.

"Stay here" Tweek demanded. He pointed his finger at Craig to show he was serious, though it wasn't angry or forceful. More protective and calm. Craig shook his head. Jagged teeth protruded from the hole of his mouth. He wasn't one to be argued with. Then again, neither was Tweek.

He reached up for the cord to the attic door and yanked it down with a strong heave. Craig's jagged lined mouth gaped open to let out a crude scream. It was more like a plea, really, but one Tweek couldn't afford to humor that night. He ran up the stairs as quickly as he could, and the ladder slammed behind him before he even had a chance to see Craig sprinting for it at the bottom. A loud bang sounded through the attic as Craig slammed into the door. He tried and tried to pull it open, but, just like every other time, he couldn't get it to budge. Tweek sat down on the door and patted the folded bars of steel beneath him.

"I'm sorry," he muttered quietly to the crying boy beneath him. He squinted again, trying to ignore Craig as his eyes shifted through dusty boxes and shadows. There was something out of place amongst the spider webs and forgotten furniture. It swung slowly from side to side. It was darker than dark, almost seeming to have absorbed any trace of blackness around it.

Like a puddle on the wall.

"Hello, David," Tweek greeted the swinging man in the shadows.

"Hello," came the immediate reply. The sound of rope grinding and creaking filled the space around him as the mass swung closer to him. It swung right into his face. Two red orbs paired together in a black mess. "It's been a while."

Tweek swallowed hard, and then nodded.

"Hm, I thought you didn't need me anymore."

"Cut the shit, you know why I don't come up here."

"Ah, yes. The little cretin below you."

The sound of Craig's head smashing against wood didn't seize as the two exchanged awkward conversation.

"Don't call him that," Tweek growled. "There's a reason he acts like this when I come up here."

"And why's that?"

"Well, you've tried to kill me multiple times."

"I would never."

"There was the time you tried to make me bite down on an electrical cord when I was a kid. Then that time you tried to get me to jump out the window..." Tweek replied. "Why are you such a

prick?"

A small bout of laughter bubbled out of David like gas through tar. "I can't help it, I like kids."

Tweek pressed his lips together.

"You didn't come here just to gripe, though, right?"

Tweek gripped the bars below him tighter as he listened to Craig's crying down below. Slowly, he nodded his head.

"Yeah. I needed to ask you a couple more questions. Just once more."

"Hm. You say that every time."

Tweek couldn't help but crack the smallest smile at that, but it quickly melted away when he heard Craig's bones scraping along the ceiling below him. "This time isn't any different then."

"Well... what would you like to ask?"

Tweek swallowed hard before playing with his fingers.

"What is he?"

"Pardon?"

"Craig. What is he?"

The rope around David's neck strained when the dark spirit let out hardy laughter. Tweek didn't much appreciate it, especially not while he was up in the attic. No matter how much he'd seen over the years, he still couldn't shake the weird chill he got up his spine when David's laughter echoed off the skeletal, wooden walls.

"Now you're asking the right questions," is all David said.

"Then answer it. What is he?"

"I'd like to joke and call him an orphanage, but that would be insensitive."

"You knew? You knew about the other boys all this time?" Tweek growled, his hands molding into frustrated fists.

"Of course. It's not hard to tell when a cluster is nearby, after all."

Tweek blinked at the suddenness of the response. The black silhouette of his limp figure wasn't a pretty thing to stare at, but the rage in him wouldn't allow him to look away.

"He's a cluster?"

"Yes. That's dangerous shit, boy," David rasped. "Evil shit."

"That's it? That's all you're gonna tell me?"

"Well," David said, his red, bulging eyes twitching. "That's all you asked."

Tweek ground his teeth together. This was another reason he hated talking to David. He was a fucking asshole. Frustrated, he decided to move on to the next question he'd been harboring.

"You always said there's no way to change someone's death, right?" Tweek began. "Like how you're gonna gag on that rope for the rest of eternity ... that can't be right. Isn't there some way to stop it?"

"Stop it?"

"Yes! If I can't find Craig's body or... or the person who caused this shit. Isn't there at least some way I could save him from all this?..."

"Save him?" David's laughter was unquenchable. "You want to save the boy?"

"What the fuck is so funny about that?" Tweek demanded.

"It's astounding to me. So astounding. You're so concerned with rewriting his death, just like he's so concerned with rewriting yours."

Tweek lost his breath for a moment, but quickly regained it. David was trying to scare him. He would do that sometimes. However, Tweek prided himself on being pretty good at weeding out the false from the truth. At least when it came to David. He was all too easy to see through.

"Stop toying with me and answer my question," Tweek grumbled under his breath. "How do I help him- I'm being serious."

The rope again began to creak as the swinging black mass turned towards him. A large, toothy grin got so close to Tweek's face he could feel the stench of death wafting off of a breath that wasn't there. "Yes, and so am I."

Tweek doubled back at the solemn tone of David's words, but if there's one thing Craig's death taught him it was how to hold his ground.

"There's not a damn thing you can do to help that abomination - just like there ain't a damn thing they can do to help you."

His eyebrows knit together as he too leaned back against the blackened face and distorted grin.

"I don't believe you," Tweek hissed through clenched teeth.

"That's fine," David said. The beams of the exposed ceiling groaned as his body swayed from side to side. "It wouldn't change a damn thing even if you did."

Tweek jolted as Craig again slammed against the door below him. He was getting more and more angry. So much so Tweek could hear the panic attack about to happen, but what could he do? David was the only one who knew anything about anything.

"Besides, damn brat," David scoffed from across the room, shrouded in his shadows as he always was. "If there was a way to help a spirit move on from the tragedy of death, do you think I'd still be here? If there was a way to escape the last place I'd be is still fucking here - my only company the likes of you."

Tweek believed that much. Honestly, he did. He closed his eyes and let his hands run across the wood beneath him. It was rotten under his fingers, and the metal bars of the folded latter were cold and harsh against his fingertips. He closed his eyes and suppressed a frown. If that was all true, why was Tweek even trying? There was no way he could believe all those years- all those holes he dug- were worth nothing. Craig was not suffering in vein. Tweek couldn't allow himself to believe that.

"Maybe... not even you know everything," Tweek tried to reason. He shook his head, and then opened his eyes to stare at the monster hanging from the ceiling across the room.

"There has to be a way. Maybe giving up hope is the reason you're still hanging there." Tweek almost flinched at his own words. That sounded way too much like something Kyle would say.

"Believe what you want," David uttered as his form melted into the blackness behind him, leaving nothing behind but empty space. "But you'll see. Sooner than later, you'll see."

When Tweek came down from the attic he felt like he could kick a wall in. He always had a sudden burst of anger every time he spoke to David. It was like they fed off of one another, and the only energy they had was negative. That day, though, he had a real reason. He was so sick and tired. David had to be lying. In some ways Tweek supposed what David had to say made some kind of sense, but that didn't help at all to quench his unfathomable rage. Craig. Was there really no way to undo this?

He was so busy storming around his room in circles he hardly noticed the little person trailing after him. Craig seemed concerned, letting out quiet little mumbles that sounded like questions Tweek didn't hear the words to. He stopped, and hands immediately grabbed onto his cloths. All he wanted to do was protect Craig. To help him.

Tiny, bleeding fingers wrapped tightly around his much bigger ones.

Speaking to David wasn't a mistake he would make again.

David's Goodbye

The car was shaky to say the least. The axis must have needed to be realigned, but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything. Not anymore. The day was still only beginning to meld into midday. He didn't want to wait till his family was home to return. He didn't want them to get in the way or have the opportunity to stop him. He came to a stop in the driveway, and then stammered out of his car. He took his work hat off of his head and hung it on the hanger by the door. He left his boots there too, along with the jacket of his uniform. He wanted to be comfortable. After all, comfort is key. He grinned to himself when he felt his toes squish against the carpet under them. Ah, the house was so quiet and relaxing when he was there by himself. Then again, things always seemed to be better when he was by himself.

He walked towards the kitchen and stopped in front of the spare closet. There were all sorts of things stored away in there. Brooms, dust pans, rope, spare pots, batteries, rope, rope, ro—

He smiled a calm smile before reaching into the closet and retrieving what he was after. Ah, yes, his new necklace would fit him perfectly- just like tailor made shoes.

He turned to head towards the living room. It was a living room familiar to you. You've been there plenty of times by now, though you haven't realized it yet. He smiled again and headed up the staircase. It was carpeted, and the railing fit perfectly under his palms. Perfect. Rope.

He came into the hallway, again, somewhere you've been. It was lined with pictures of different people and the walls weren't the same color, but the house was still the same.

He pushed open the door to his daughter's bedroom. Ah. This is the room you're most familiar with. You were there when this story began, in fact. How did you make it so far in the past? Are you perhaps a time traveler, traversing through time and dimensions as you please? Perhaps you yourself have been indulging in visions. Do you touch their hands while they sleep?

How rude.

Nonetheless, Crayon portraits and tiny horses surrounded him and you in a childlike wonderland. The walls were pink, then. Sun-kissed strawberry skies. He ran his rough fingers over the soothing color as he made his way across the room. The tips of his digits felt horsehair and bows left on a white dresser. He smiled at them, but it soon wavered into a frown.

"I hope you forgive me," the man uttered.

Despite all your power to see what everyone else cannot, you're confused now. Who is this oddly familiar man in this oddly familiar room?

A rabbit stood in the corner, though it wasn't made of stuffing and fabric. It stood six feet tall. A fancy blue suit fit snugly around its thick, human ribcage. Its bulging eyes twitched as they followed his movements across the room. He couldn't see it, just like it cannot see you. It was there waiting for him. As it had been since the day he was born.

When he reached up to yank hard on a cord dangling from the ceiling, the rabbit smiled around its buck teeth. You cringed at its ugly face, but remain wordless as you always have.

He held the rope tightly in his fist and kicked off his shoes when he reached the top. The attic was dark and cold, but the rabbit was waiting for him there, too. Where the light stopped and the darkness began is where it hid. Its big hands were clasped behind its back.

The sound of a chairs legs scarping against the wooden floor was such beautiful music to its long ears. The groan of rope being knotted against the rafters was the verse, the chair's back slamming against the floor was the bridge, and strangled gagging was the chorus. After that, there was only silence.

Silence filled with the creaking of straining rope. It remained that way until a pair of bulging eyes lazily slid towards a urfry face. The rope was tugging painfully tight around his windpipe. All the air had left his lungs, hiwch flet htme burning nad painfully empty. He tried to gasp, but the thick cord only crushed his throat.

Ybame fi heter swa a ayw ot sopt82 lal htsi goany wteke oudlc ovme no. Yameb ew oulde vahe tsoepdp eltingi hist tsory eforbe it tsretda. Heter si on ohp3 own. Htis tosry aws lerdy a vore. &*)

"Tsk," murmured the rabbit as he stepped out of the dark. "How eager humans are to seal their suffering."

Het nam agspde.

"What? This is what you wanted, isn't it?" The rabbit uttered. "Or did you believe death would be the end of your pain?"

The hanging man's popping eyes watered &&& dripped with sadness ^^** fear. He could hear the house come lavie with voices beneath him. The familiar ~~~ of playing children and his olvre. He didn't think he would have to face those voices again.

"You can pass on unburdened if you wish," The rabbit chimed. "But, isn't there something you'd rather have?"

"I can let you remain here, David. If you've unfinished business. All I ask is one thing in return."

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oany wteke oudlc ovme no. Yameb ew oudlc vahe tsoepdp eltngi hist tsory eforbe it tsretda. Heter
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You strain your eyes in hopes of understanding more, but nothing else comes. You may have the odd power to read their minds and meld in and out of their reality, but you don't have more power than I. Not here in these pages, anyway.

I hope that doesn't scare you.

...

It had been days since Tweek showed up with that awful plastic sack. They'd spoken a couple times since then, but it was obvious Tweek had a lot on his mind and didn't want to be bothered. His space was hard to respect, though. Kyle's nightmares had been getting worse. When he slept he could still hear that shrill screaming. He tried to bring it up to Tweek at lunch, but he stopped eating in the cafeteria. He tried to bring it up when they ran into one another between classes, but Tweek waved him away.

All he wanted was someone to lean on. Well, maybe not any someone. Maybe he just wanted Tweek. That was a weird thought. It was true, though. Even when they were slumming it in the woods past midnight, Kyle felt safe and assured when the Shadowman was watching over him.

He hoped he could intercept him before their next class. He wished lunch wasn't passing so slowly. It didn't help that Butters was tapping a pencil against the edge of his tray. It was one of the very few things that could truly annoy the fuck out of Kyle. He leaned forward and rubbed his forehead with his thumb and index finger before groaning loudly in protest.

Butters looked over to him before blinking innocently.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Kyle. Didn't mean to bother you," Butters said before putting his pencil back down on the table beside him. "Have you been alright lately? Well, you're kinda grouchy."

"Yeah, what the hell's wrong with you?" Eric demanded with eyes narrowing. Had he kept his mouth shut, maybe Kyle wouldn't have been spitting with rage.

"Nothing. I just haven't been sleeping well, damn," Kyle snapped. He waved away the notion with the back of his hand. "Don't worry about it."

"I can worry about whatever I damn well please," Eric growled, but his face changed when he realized what he'd just said. "Well, I'm not worried. You getting pissy like this just usually leads to some pretty crazy shit."

"But nothing's wrong. I'm just tired, like I already said."

Kenny was sitting across from Kyle, a deep frown forming across his face. Kyle couldn't lie. Not to him. Kenny saw through him too easily.

"You know you can talk to us if something is wrong," Kenny uttered under the noise of the cafeteria. "Well, at least me."

This much was true. Kenny was always there for him. It felt so wrong to try to push him away. He bit his bottom lip, but didn't say anything as Kenny's eyes grew heavier and heavier from across the table. Of course he wanted to give them answers. He wanted to tell them everything, but how could he? Not only did he promise Tweek he'd never tell anyone his Shadowman secret, but he didn't ever want to tell anyone what that shirt showed him again.

That's what was truly wrong. He could handle all Tweek's weirdness and Craig's tragic history. It took a toll, but not one Kyle couldn't pay. It was seeing it that left him so fucked up. Watching that boy, Thomas, being torn apart but having no way to make it stop. The crimson spilling. The begging and pleading.

To watch a child die. And in such a tragic and disgusting way.

"This isn't like you," Kenny said when he registered the despaired look on Kyle's face.

Kyle pulled his text book from his backpack and set it before him. He flipped his book open to a random page and pretended to read, as if that would ward off his friend's barrage of hard questions. Instead, a hand slammed down on the paper before him and dragged it out of his hands. Kenny. He didn't look as angry as his hand seemed, he just wore a low frown and high eyebrows.

"Ky," Kenny muttered with that all knowing look. The kind that made Kyle feel small like a child.

"Ken," Kyle retorted, looking as if he could pounce at any moment. He was so fed up. He shook his head hard. "Listen, I just can't do this right now, okay. I'm not doing bad so don't worry, I'm just focusing on school and graduation and college and all that stuff. Yeah, it's stressful, but that's all. Can't a guy just have a little time on his own?"

Kenny frowned deeply. He didn't believe him, which frustrated Kyle even more.

"It's okay, Ky. I just -"

"No, you know what? It's not okay. I'm so sick and tired of always being treated like I'm so damn fragile all the time. Sure, I'm fucked up after what happened to Stan. All of us are, but that doesn't mean I'm completely incapable of taking care of my own damn self. Mind your own fucking business."

Kenny looked shocked by Kyle's sudden outburst. His blue eyes widened and his brows furrowed with hurt. The group all sat quiet as Kyle's angry gaze wavered with regret. That twisting feeling in Kyle's stomach squeezed tighter when Kenny jolted up from his chair and stormed into the hallway, leaving his class folders and half eaten lunch behind.

"H-hey! Kenny, wait!" Butters tried to call out, but Kenny wasn't having it. He didn't even look back as he disappeared into the hall, and Kyle just shifted his gaze down to his plate to stab at his food with a fork.

He didn't mean to make Kenny angry. For God's sake he only wanted to be left to stew in his misery alone.

"You're a fucking dickweed, you know that," Eric uttered from across the table.

"Excuse me?" Kyle sputtered.

"You don't want us to treat you like a kid, fine, I'll tell you the cold hard truth-"

"Eric, no," Butters scolded, but it didn't stop his friend.

"Kenny's been spending all this fucking time making sure you're alright and you're gonna repay him by treating him like shit?"

Kyle blinked, then felt his mouth go dry as Cartman seethed from across the table.

"I'm not treating anybody like shit I'm just sick of-"

"Of what? Your friends giving enough of a damn to look out for you? Of fucking course we were all in shambles after what happened to Stan, but the only reason you're even fucking glued enough together to function is because we took care of you."

Kyle looked down at his tray and shook his head, though he wasn't sure why. There was a little piece inside him shriveling to a pulp when he realized Cartman of all people might have been right. Not only that, but... Kyle was the one in the wrong. He shook his head again. There was nothing wrong with wanting to be independent. There was nothing wrong with keeping his friends far away from the mess he'd gotten himself into. At least that's what he kept telling himself.

"And Kenny? He's the guy who stayed at your damn house for two weeks because you couldn't even get out of your fucking bed without him-"

"Shut up," Kyle growled. His cheeks were tinting pink and his fist was curling around the edge of the table.

"No! HE PRACTICALLY FUCKING SPOON FED YOU! Everything always has to stop for Kyle, right? Nothing matters except what Kyle wants. If Kyle's okay. What about Kenny? Have you ever once stopped to think about how it affected him to see Stan splattered on the fucking pavement,

then have to be the one to piece you back together!?"

Kyle's mouth opened like he wanted to curse back, but he was floored. Did he ever stop to ask if Kenny was okay? Ken was his best friend in the whole world. It'd be despicably selfish of him if he didn't!

Then... why hadn't he?

Kyle felt like he was going to throw up again.

"Ken's gonna be awful sore if he hears you're hollerin' at Kyle!" Butters warned when he saw Kyle's face losing its color. A cruel smirk spread across Cartman's lips. It was clear by his satisfied look he couldn't care less about Butters' warning. He wanted to say this for a long time.

"I'm only saying what Kenny should have said a long time ago. Kyle doesn't give a shit about anybody anymore."

"SHUT UP!" Kyle screamed, nearly throwing his tray as he jolted up in his chair. Butters slid back as Kyle shook his head and fumed. There were so many things he wished he could say, but his hands were shaking too hard and he knew he couldn't argue. It was all true.

The night they first encountered the Shadowman flashed before his eyes. The fear on Kenny's face when he thought they'd lost him. The relief when he scooped Kyle up against him. Every sweet, selfless thing Kenny ever did for Kyle flooded his eyes with bitter water.

He was a piece of shit friend.

"Ky..." Butters muttered before standing from his seat as if he were about to console him. Butters wasn't the only pair of eyes on him, however. Every person in the cafeteria was gawking at him over their lunches. His face flushed deeper as he assaulted his tears with the sleeve of his shirt. He could hear the faint murmur of whispers closing in from every direction.

Butters couldn't take another step before Kyle haphazardly snatched his book up from the table. He power walked to the doors with his head down. How could he face Kenny again after hearing that? How could he make up for the misery this last year has caused? How could he get the blue eyes of that dying boy out of his head?

Soon he found himself wandering alone in the hallways. His face was still red and wet, but he long since gave up wiping it dry. He just wanted to see Tweek. He knew better, though. The Shadowman's grief was more than Kyle could fix. He'd just find some way to make that worse, too.

He somehow found himself sitting in a bathroom stall. His legs were curled up against his chest, which was heaving. He wanted to feel something. Grief, sorrow, regret, but Kenny's sandy hair and bright blue eyes blurred in his head until they belonged to someone else completely. Someone who's shrieking and pleading melded together with the gush of busted veins and heavy breathing.

The vision Tweek subjected him to was stained inside his eyes.

It was then, when his trickle of tears became a waterfall, the warmth of someone's hand brush the flood away. When his bloodshot eyes scanned the tiny stall there was no one to be seen, but he knew he wasn't alone. Somehow, he knew.

...

The last few days for Tweek had been lonely ones. He closed himself off from everyone in an attempt to clear his head and figure this whole mess out. So far, he was doing the opposite. When he wasn't at the pond frantically getting in his digging before the snow came he was sitting on his bed staring into the television.

The TV was on but he wasn't watching. Instead he was staring blankly as his mind was consumed by all things Craig. Where he truly was. What was truly happening. Craig didn't help much himself. He stood across the room beside the television. Perhaps he sensed Tweek's unease. Maybe that's what he got down on all fours and slinked across the room until his finger bones scaped against Tweek's feet. He seemed to think he'd done something wrong. Maybe Tweek had been so distant because of him? That thought made a low sound of sadness bubble up from the bottom of Craig's throat.

Tweek gazed down at the creature, and then patted his knees to show its okay to come up into his lap. And he did. Little hands gripped at Tweek's knees and pulled a limp body up onto the other's lap. Craig curled up there, and Tweek let his arms fall down onto either side of the mud streaked boy.

"I feel bad," Tweek muttered quietly. The flickering of the light shined onto them both as Tweek rubbed Craig's back. He sat his chin down onto the top of Craig's head and sighed. "For making Kyle upset like that last time we saw him. I feel guilty for making him touch that shirt. Is that stupid?"

Craig let out little grumbles.

"He's been nothing but nice to us. I don't see how. I'm such a dick."

Craig jerked awkwardly. He fell from Tweek's grasp and perched on the edge of the mattress. He was on guard. Tweek knew why. He could hear David upstairs, too.

"Mm," Tweek fumbled as he reached around his bed for Craig. "It's okay. David hasn't bothered us since I last talked to him. I wouldn't worry about it tonight."

Craig, however, didn't seem so convinced. He remained static on the side of Tweek's bed, head cocked up towards the ceiling like there was something to see in the white wall above them. Tweek leaned to the side to wrap one of his arms around the boy and scoop him back into bed. Tweek held Craig from behind, squeezing the child in reassurance. This didn't make the growling subside in the least.

"I promise, Craig. There's nothing to-"

CRASH.

Tweek nearly jumped out of his skin at the ruckus happening above them. He blinked, and tried not to seem like he was cowering when he heard nails scratching along wood, as if someone was desperately grabbing for the floor as they were dragged away. Craig's growling only proved more intense as the sounds continued. His bubbly sleepy sounds were traded in for the demeanor of a junk yard dog. Jagged teeth and all.

Tweek slowly sat up in bed, his ears open wide. It sounded almost like a fight was happening above them, which didn't make sense. No one was in the attic, no one but David, but it'd be hard for him to make all that noise on his own. Tweek made a move to throw his legs over the edge of the bed, but Craig grappled with him a short moment to try and keep him where he was.

"I'll be fine," Tweek tried to assure him. "I'm just going to check on David."

He rolled out of bed despite Craig's noisy protests, and then made his way towards the attic door. He grabbed the string, and immediately noticed something different when it fell open. There was an odd odor to the air. It smelled a lot less like a musty attic and much more like ammonia- like piss. Tweek curled up his nose at the smell. It only made the odd sounds that much creepier to him. Among the clawing and struggling Tweek also heard another sound. It was loud and pleading a voice. One he recognized. David?

He hoisted himself up onto the ladder and climbed as quickly as he could. Craig was screaming at the bottom. The room was as pitch black as always, but he could make out no swinging form as per usual. He stumbled to his feet and felt around the air for the switch to flick on the attic light. He caught the string in his fingers and yanked down, flooding the room with a buzzing, flickering light.

Tweek's mouth went dry when he caught sight of something that most definitely was not David. It was a man in a nice button up suit. He was rather tall, which was evident with how his fuzzy ears brushed along the rafters above them. The man adjusted a monocle with his free paw, and the other wrung tightly around a flailing body's neck.

David.

Tweek was frozen with his mouth slack as the strange man's pink nose twitched at his smell. His mouth went dry as said stranger ran a paw through the messy, bloodied fur of his maw. Tweek's heart pounded on his rib cage like an angry lion, though he felt no bravery. The rabbit man tightened the rope around David's neck, and then yanked the black form across the floor like a rag doll. David let out a gasping yawl of agony.

His frantic eyes, bulging from his skull as always, landed on Tweek's shaking form. He seemed to be trying to say something, but no words fell out of his blue lips.

"L-let him go!" Tweek finally spat with his fists curling.

The rabbit's eyes glimmered in the yellow attic light, then a human smile curled around its buck teeth.

"His time is up, Mr. Shadowman," Said the rabbit over the sound of David's gargled pleads. "Don't worry. Soon, yours will be too. We'll be back for you... both of you."

A pair of cold hands grabbed Tweek around his ankles, which finally made him let out a blood curdling scream as he was ripped from the edge of the floor and pulled down the latter. He smacked his chin against one of the metal bars before crashing into the floor below. A collection of arms shot up like snakes and slammed the attic closed so hard dust fell from the ceiling. Tweek felt a sharp pain when he pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and a metallic taste came to him.

Blood. He could taste it in the cracks between his teeth. He rose up and dizzily stared at the ceiling. It almost seemed to be spinning. He spotted Craig in the streams of colors. He stood beneath the closed door, staring up blankly. What? What was that thing?

Footsteps creaked the ceiling above them, and then everything fell silent. Tweek jumped up from the floor despite the buzzing bouncing around in his head and snatched Craig up. He backed away, holding the other close to his chest and huffing.

Did that abomination just take David? How? Where to? It didn't make sense.

Had it been lingering in his house all along?

Could it take Craig, too?

He carried Craig with him out of his room and out of his house. Into the yard and into the shed. He only sat down the other to collect a few wood planks and an old set of nails that had long since began to orange with rust. He turned with these things in hand, and Craig's bare feet slapped behind the creaking of Tweek's heavy boots. He came back into his room, brought his desk chair to the attic door, and Craig curled himself up in a ball on the floor as he watched Tweek nail the boards against the ceiling.

When the hammer finally hit the carpet he'd sealed the attic with wood and iron. Craig didn't make a sound as Tweek again picked him up. Craig latched onto his front, and he felt the trembling of Tweek's heart as he picked his backpack up off the floor and headed back out the door.

David's warnings screamed in Tweek's head like sirens.

"There's not a damn thing you can do to help that abomination- just like there ain't a damn thing they can do to help you."

He was lying. He had to be.

"It's astounding to me. So astounding. You're so concerned with rewriting his death, just like he's so concerned with rewriting yours."

Or maybe it was a warning.

All Good Things

His shovel dragged behind him as he trudged through the woods. The Shadowman was fresh back then; he was still only twelve. His hands were scarless - mostly - and his hopes were still high. He believed in a lot of things; a lot of things he no longer does.

His feet kicked up old leaves as he tried to pick a place to dig. The fall was slowly becoming winter, and he knew that searching would be a useless prospect if the ground was frozen too solid for his shovel to pierce through. He had to find Craig soon. There were still footprints from the first search parties that found nothing. Tweek stomped over them in anger. Those people left. They gave up and they left. Not Tweek.

Not the Shadowman.

He wasn't alone, though. There was another with him, as there always was. A tiny figure in a clumsily made yellow sweater. It was fashioned from an old yarn roll that once belonged to Tweek's grandmother. His hands weren't nearly as skilled in the beginning, so the poor thing looked more knotted in places than it did kitted. Nonetheless, Craig still loved it. He was humming oddly as he shuttered after his determined companion.

"You know this would be easier if you'd help me out," Tweek's, much higher, voice complained softly to his friend. "If anything looks familiar or whate-"

He was stopped dead mid-sentence when the ground decided it couldn't hold him. He let out a strangled yell as he fell through the forest floor and into a cavern below. A screech accompanied his own. It was the terrified cry of his little monster. Tweek coughed as he cracked his eyes open. Everything around him was completely pitch black, with the exception of the two white dots peering down from the hole above him.

He grabbed at his pained ribs. Thankfully he didn't fall on his head.

He sat up and coughed again, jumping when he realized Craig was sitting beside him.

"S-shit, holy fuck," Tweek shouted at the faint sight of Craig's meaty face holes. "Warn a guy, will you?"

Craig chirped, Tweek whimpered.

"W-where are we? Holy Jesus, we didn't fall into a mole people hole did we?" He cried in terrified confusion. "DO YOU THINK THEY'LL EAT US CRAIG?"

The apparition only garbled in response, and Tweek finally got the bright idea to pull his phone out of his pocket. He opened the broken flip phone, and its flash brightened the tunnel like a flash light.

"Oh shit," Tweek uttered as he panned his light around them. Cement. They were in a fucking cement tunnel in the ground. That didn't make much sense. It was huge, and appeared untouched for decades by anything except for the families of rats that scurried about with alarmed squeaks.

"Craig?" Tweek questioned, earning a hum of a response. "Do you know what way to go?"

The little spirit was facing one way, but started moving the other, seeming to slide backwards and flicker in and out like a candle flame.

"Well okay, this way then," he muttered with shifting eyes.

Something felt so wrong about that place. His hair was all standing on end and his mouth felt dry. The farther they drifted down the tunnel the worse Tweek felt. His stomach was churning, and the odd things they'd see along the way didn't help. A cot accompanied by a pile of dusty beer bottles, as if someone had once squatted there. Old gurneys and scalpels that Tweek would occasionally step on. He couldn't help but feel like there was always something just out of the reach of his phone's light. Craig seemed just as shaken. His arms would jerk and his head as well, like there was some sort of interruption and he was a glitching hologram.

Continuing on seemed like suicide.

However, they really didn't have any choice. There was no way they could go back all that way he knew they couldn't climb out. At least Tweek couldn't. The only way to go was forward. He frowned as they came upon an end to their tunnel. It was a door. A big metal one. It had a rather hefty looking lock, but it was ajar.

Tweek felt like his lungs were made of lead when he gripped the cold handle. There was something on the other side. What exactly that something was, he didn't know, but he was hoping it'd leave them alone long enough to make their escape.

"Okay... h-here we go- Jesus Christ," he grumbled as he pulled the door open with a metallic whine. He shined his light inside, but saw nothing except an old room and a cot.

Craig began a low and angry rumble. That didn't at all help Tweek's mood. He gritted his teeth and shook his head. From across the room he could see another door. There was no promise it would give him salvation, but it was really the only hope he had. He huffed in a show of feigned confidence before stepping in. Craig wanted to remain outside, but couldn't resist following Tweek into the odd feeling room. To the left was a long metal table. Cork boards lined with pictures and documents littered the wall above it. Odd medical instruments laid strewn about the tabletop and floor. What was most unsettling, though, was the cot in the center of the room. It was a metal gurney, covered delicately with a white sheet. Tweek took a step back when he realized it appeared there was a person beneath it. The white cloth rose and fell with slow, unsteady breaths, and he could make out gasping under Craig's persistent growl.

Tweek pressed his hand into Craig's hair to quiet him, and then slowly attempted to reach the next door without being noticed. The figure under the sheet didn't seem disturbed until Tweek's boot slammed into a scalpel, sending it sliding across the floor where it clinked against the wall with a loud ring. He jerked his head back to the cot, where the cloth was swaying with irritation. His mouth went dry. His hands began to tremble. The figure beneath rose from its torpor state. The white sheet fell from its shuttering, slender shoulders and into its lap. He bit down hard on his tongue when Craig let out a small and unsure sounding cry.

The bulbous head swayed under its own weight. This gave Tweek a good view of the dozens of mutilated faces it bared. He stumbled back as the creature warped and rumbled. A plethora of new arms burst from its back and rose its limp carcass off the operating table. It jerked and twisted in a way that was familiar to Tweek. As its dozens upon dozens of arms sprawled out across the floor, it let out a booming screech from its snaggle toothed mouths.

Tweek realized all too well why it seemed so familiar.

It was like Craig.

Tweek stumbled back when an arm launched at him like an arrow. It missed, but just barely as he

turned and ran towards the door. His boots squeaked against old linoleum as he tried his best to outrun the spider like arms shooting at him. There were so many he had to launch himself over a few lying in wait on the floor. The door. It was so close, but he would never reach it with all those limbs tangling up in his way.

They warped and pumped like breathing creatures before another shot up from this floor. This one didn't miss. It caught him in the thigh like the blade of a knife. He cried out and fell to the floor with a pained thump. The arm covered in his blood seemed to be searching for him, along with all the others. He crawled on his hands and knees towards the nearest cover he had; an old table that had been left on its side. Craig had already beaten him there. He was curled tightly in a ball, too afraid to move.

Loud shuffling came from the darkness on the other side of the tabletop. The creature's arms launched all around the room, busting beakers and tossing things over. Tweek squeezed Craig close to him as he tried to steady his breathing. The door was just about ten feet away from them. The arms were too busy searching for him to guard it. He could stand up and make a break for it, but the lumbering monster behind them was too fucking fast.

A hand slammed against the back of their table, forcing them to slide across the floor as it pushed. Tweek bit his tongue and squeezed Craig to try and keep him from screaming.

"We have to run for it," he whispered. It wasn't going to work. He was going to get shredded on the way out- if he got out at all.

It was too late, anyway. A stray set of fingers squeezed around Tweek's ankle, and it wasn't one of Craig's. The table behind them launched into the air and smashed against the ceiling, sending shattered pieces of wood raining down onto Tweek as he struggled to stand up. The icy grip ensnaring his leg jerked back hard, and Tweek again smashed into the hard tile below. Dozens of hands squeezed his legs so hard they were nearly being crushed as he was dragged back through the wooden debris.

"Craig run!" Tweek demanded as the eyeless spirit reached for him with small, weak arms of his own.

Craig was dragged along the floor with him, his extra limbs refusing to let go even as Tweek was lifted from the floor. The tiny grip was broken when the much stronger monster hurled Tweek against the hard wall. He cried out as his ribs cracked against the force. He fell onto the tables that lined the walls, and then his limp form crashed back down onto the floor.

"You won't hurt us again!" spilled from the beasts gaping, large mouths. "You won't hurt me!"

Those words shattered Tweek worse than its powerful blows. It wasn't angry, it was afraid. That fear had so consumed it that whoever it had been in life was gone completely.

Tweek lifted his arms to shield his face as another scalpel wielding fist bared down on him. The blade sunk deep into his forearm, causing another pained cry.

Both the beast and struggling child were distracted by Craig's form in the discarded light of his cell phone, which had been abandoned on the floor. Sobbing spilled out of the small boy, a sound that for some reason Tweek's attacker couldn't handle.

The beast turned its head towards the sound, gaping wide eyes locking onto the boy before letting out a cry of its own. The fist gripping the scalpel in Tweek's arm released him to cover the monster's ears. It screamed as it sank to the floor. Its plethora of branch-like limbs cocooned the

miserable creature.

Tweek stumbled to his feet and ran, grabbing Craig by his arm and scrambling for the door.

He slammed it behind them as hard as he could. His heart pounded with violence in his chest as he heard fists banging on the other side. He had no light, so Craig held his hand to guide him forward as he limped. Craig led him around tables and up a stair case, where the faintest hint of light was gleaming. Tweek struggled up the steps and into a hallway. It was lit faintly by the moon through busted windows, which made Tweek feel better knowing at least they were above ground. Craig didn't let go of his hand as he fell back and slid down the wall.

He could still hear faint screaming from downstairs, which made him want to get up and keep moving, but his legs felt like limp noodles and his clothes were even warmer. When he looked at his and Craig's interlinked hands he lost his breath. His fingers were doused in blood. In a panic, he looked down at the pain in his stomach. A glint glittered back from the handle of the scalpel that had been driven into his gut.

This time, Tweek was the one crying. His shaking hands wrapped around the wound as he choked on his own spit. What kind of demon would do something so terrible? Craig's hands were bigger than his back then.

They curled over his own and squeezed.

...

Tweek hadn't been going to school. In all fairness, he hadn't been going home, either. He was in the woods; the only place that mattered to him. Digging for Craig; the only thing he knew to do.

David and the rabbit man left him shaken. Afraid. If what they were saying was true he would be gone soon. He would be suffering some terrible fate, and Craig would have no chance at being found. Being saved.

This was unacceptable.

So he dug. He dug without thinking; without covering the holes he made. He dug through the night and even risked littering the dirt with holes during the day. Somehow, though, he knew it was no use.

He was daydreaming of possibilities on Saturday morning. The broken tile of the kitchen floor was his pillow, and Craig's cold touch was his blanket. His bones ached to the core and his stomach begged for food. His hair was greasy and matted and his tongue was dry and thirsty. Still, he couldn't think of himself.

Craig laid his head on the peak of Tweek's shoulder. He wanted to cry, but he knew he shouldn't. Instead, he wrapped a shaking arm over Tweek's ribs and squeezed. The silence scraped on the inside of Craig's skull.

Tweek deserved better.

He deserved better than the dirty floor he was laying on and the agony in his soul. He deserved friends and happiness and a life filled with good things.

Craig tried to be a good thing.

He tried.

Tweek's shaking hand moved over the tiny one clutching at his chest. He squeezed it against the warmth of his heart. Even now, at the end of his rope, all Tweek cared about was that tiny creature. The very thing that put him in that terrible place to begin with.

A knock came to the decaying door only feet away from Tweek's sullied boots. He didn't bother to get up off of the floor. He knew who it was, and he knew it was a mistake to've let them in in the first place.

The knocking came again, though, and when Tweek still didn't answer the door creaked open.

"Tweek?" the familiar voice questioned.

"Tweek!"

Heavy footsteps rushed to his side. Craig didn't hiss or spit when a hand reached around him to lay on Tweek's forehead. He just raised up his heavy head and stared at the intruder with empty sockets.

Tweek squinted up through morning's gray light. He caught a hint of fire. Kyle's unruly mop of hair peeked out from under his green hat.

"Tweek... are you okay?"

"You shouldn't be here."

Kyle's concerned expression morphed into one of aggravation and annoyance.

"I came to check on you, you ass," Kyle huffed. "Since you've been ignoring me for days on end. Then you upright disappear off the face of the earth."

Tweek wanted to frown, but his lips were chapped and his muscles were working against him.

"C'mon," Kyle uttered as he slipped an arm under Tweek's head, "get up off the floor."

Tweek lifted his aching body against Kyle with a groan.

"There we go."

Kyle pushed up, lifting Tweek away from the filthy kitchen tiles he'd been sleeping on. Craig wanted to help, too. His hands still lingered on Tweek, and he let out a heaving sound when his friend was lifted. Kyle smiled a little at the mud streaked apparition.

Once Tweek was on his feet he decided he'd rather lean against the dilapidated counter than Kyle.

"I mean it," Tweek finally muttered. "You really shouldn't be here."

"Well somebody needs to be," Kyle retorted as his brows furrowed. "You... well, you look like a mess. For god's sake I found you laying on the floor."

That last bit made Tweek cringe with embarrassment.

"How long have you been out here?" Kyle pushed.

"Couple days."

"When's the last time you ate?"

"Um, couple days."

"God damn it. I figured as much."

Kyle jerks his backpack off of the floor, drops it on the counter, and rifles through it. He didn't bother to ask why Tweek didn't want him there, and Tweek didn't want to tell him.

"I brought you something," Kyle said before shoving a paper bag into Tweek's chest. It still felt faintly warm at the bottom. Upon opening it Tweek discovered a bologna sandwich, a bag of chips, and a gray thermos. Part of him wanted to toss it back at Kyle and tell him to get out, but the smell of the sandwich made his stomach churn and growl for it. He ripped his bandanna off his face. His tongue still throbbed against the roof of his mouth. It was stinging and painful, but his hunger was stronger.

Tweek tore through the bread and meat ravenously. His fingers shook as he squeezed the food between them, and he tasted a little dirt when he stuffed the last bit of it into his mouth. It was from his hands, which were still sullied by last night's digging.

He was working on the chips when Kyle finally spoke up again.

"When you didn't show up for school I knew where you'd be."

Tweek wanted to congratulate him on his superior intellect, but was too busy shoving chips in his mouth to use it for sarcasm.

"I was getting really worried about you," Kyle then admitted, which caused Tweek to bite his finger.

Worried? Kyle was worried about him? His first instinct was to laugh, but he didn't, because he knew Kyle wasn't like everyone else. Kyle was honest. He said it because he meant it.

That urge to laugh became a painful bubbling in Tweek's chest.

"I'm not upset," Kyle added as if he had to explain himself. "I just want to know what's up with you. I mean, I know winter's coming and times are desperate, but you always come back home for school."

God, Kyle was making him feel... well. What was that feeling? His chest was... heavy? His heart was sore. His eyes were... wet...

Or at least they would be if he didn't still the restlessness writhing under his flesh.

"I'm just trying to find him," Tweek replied through gritted teeth. "Just like always."

Kyle didn't seem to believe that answer, but he let the sleeping dog lie.

"Well... I really hate to say this, but I don't think you're ever going to find him this way. No matter how many holes you dig..."

"Then what the hell would you suggest?" Tweek spat more venomously than he'd intended.

"Um, I- uh," Kyle fidgeted with the strap of a backpack that hung from his shoulders. "I did some research."

The redhead pursed his lips together and looked up at Tweek.

"Obviously we're missing a lot. All we know is Craig was drown in Stark's and probably killed by the same guy responsible for the blond boys, but I think that might be how we can figure this out."

"I'm listening," Tweek growled as he rubbed the crust out of his eyelashes.

"Craig, well... he's the out-liar. He isn't anything like the other boys, so if we find out why-"

"It could lead us to him?"

"Or at least closer."

"Fine, then. Let's do this."

...

There were pictures and notes tacked to the wall where Tweek's map used to be. He and Kyle each took an edge, and, with one hard yank, Tweek's five years of digging were reduced to a crumbled heap of paper on the floor. It ached to see his map so shredded and out of place, but there was a picture of Craig where it once hung. It was the one his parents chose for his posters; Kyle tacked it up along with the faces of other boys.

Seeing Craig's face again, the way it was before; his big blue eyes and wide smile... it filled Tweek with fire.

"Okay, so I searched for any blond boy I could find that's went missing in recent decades. I found about eighteen, but only six are still missing. Convenient, right?" Kyle uttered as he scanned the board.

"But it's surprising just how much you can't find on the Internet. I just know they were all around Park County, and they were taken when they were walking to or from home by themselves."

"That's it, isn't it? That's all we know," Tweek uttered.

"Well, not exactly. We know the other boys had... more morbid deaths, while Craig was drown. That must count for something."

"Hm," was the only reply.

Tweek was leaned back against the wall across the room. He scratched at the stubble on his chin. Maybe it was to distract from his unease. His eyes were distant, and his lips were pushed together into an uncomfortable line.

"...If you don't shave soon, you'll be growing a beard," Kyle noted in spite of the gloom, though a hopeful smile tugged at his sad expression.

Tweek ran his palm over his cheek.

"Yeah, I got there once before. I look weird with facial hair."

"No, I like it," Kyle admits, perhaps a bit too eagerly. "Makes you look..."

Kyle took in Tweek's appearance. Beneath the dirt on his face Tweek hid high cheeks and a sharp jawline. His eyes were intense and dark despite their bright blue color, and all his time with his shovel left him solid and strong. Kyle made a few hand gestures Tweek didn't know what to make of.

"Well..." Kyle pushed his lips together as his cheeks tinted a slight pinkish, "Nice."

Tweek chuckled. His eyes fell to the floor, an almost bashful smile on his face.

"Thank you."

He really was quite charming when he wasn't busy being an asshole, but Kyle already knew that.

Perhaps right then wasn't the best time for idle conversation. They had information on the wall and a dire situation to deal with, but Kyle was suddenly filled with so many questions. In all the time they've spent together, they've never really just... talked.

Kyle turned his head back to the wall of missing faces. Craig's picture stared down at him with happy eyes. Kyle wondered how long it had been since Tweek truly talked to anyone at all.

"Can I ask you something?" he pondered.

There was a silence for a short moment before Tweek answered with, "what is it?"

"When's the last time you remember laughing? I mean... really laughing."

There was another silence, though it was much longer than the last.

"Maybe... the last night I spent with Craig. I don't even remember why now, but we were pelting each other with pillows, and he fell off the bed."

Tweek's small grin widened.

"It wasn't even that funny... I guess it was just easier back then," Tweek's gaze shifted back to Kyle, "How about you?"

Kyle twiddled his thumbs a moment in thought. It was an easier question to ask than it was to answer.

"Probably a year or so ago... when Stan was still-" his breath caught in his throat. He wound his hands tightly together to suppress the urge to wipe at his eyes. It had been a year, but he still spilled over every time. He had to change the subject to calm the storm in his chest.

"Maybe- Maybe we should try to laugh again," he suggested. "You know, before we dive too far back into this sad pit."

Laugh again? Tweek wasn't even sure if he could. He could manage a lackluster chuckle from time to time, usually caused by Craig's antics, but that was about it.

How did someone even make another person laugh?

Craig had the answer.

He was stuck to the wall behind Tweek. All his arms unfurled as he floated there. He yanked on his friend's collar, but when the boy turned around Craig had shifted like a shadow beneath the nearby table.

"What the hell?" Tweek nearly squealed as Kyle pelted him in the arm with a pillow. "Dude, where'd you even get that?"

Kyle laughed, the pillow gripped in his fists like a vise. "Craig gave it to me."

He wanted to ask how the hell they managed that one so quickly, but Kyle hit him again. Tweek

made a grab for Kyle's weapon, but just barely missed.

"Now I'm going to take it from you."

"Nope!"

Kyle dodged when Tweek threw himself at him. Tweek ended up tumbling into the wall, which gave Kyle plenty time to escape. His wet shoes slid across the floor as he threw open the door to the hall.

"You can't have a pillow fight with only one pillow!" Tweek screamed, right on his heels.

"I do what I want!" Kyle shouted in return as he ran down the stairs.

"Now you sound like Cartman!"

"Wow! Wow, rude!"

Kyle stopped in a corner of the living room. There was no escape. Tweek loomed onto him. A sly smirk cracked onto the blond's face, and his hands were open and ready to snatch away Kyle's only defense. Kyle managed to hit him in the face with fluff before they both went down. Their hands grappled for the fabric, but Tweek was winning. He had Kyle pinned against himself and the floor. His grip was stronger, and with the laughter of a comic book villain, Tweek raised the pillow high above his head in victory.

"Now who does as he wants?!" Tweek hollered. "Any last words, Kyle Broflovski?!"

Kyle's eyes were trained intensely on the ceiling, and then he was the one laughing.

"Only two!" he bellowed. "Get him!"

The coveted pillow was suddenly missing from Tweek's hands. When he looked up, he was met with a truly terrifying sight. Craig, perched above them, pillow in hand and a smile on his face.

"You are such a traitor!" Tweek cried as Craig lowered himself from the ceiling. "You're on my side, remember?"

Craig pulled the pillow back behind his shoulder.

"Craig," Tweek warned with his arms ready to shield himself. "Don't you even d-"

The pillow came crashing down onto him.

"What did I say?" Tweek managed to pluck Craig from the air, but he couldn't subdue the arms pelting him.

Echoing sounds of their laughter sang through the barren walls of that house. Kyle and Craig had Tweek cornered, which resulted in a forfeit. It wasn't long before they laid on the floor, too out of breath to keep struggling. It felt so unfathomably liberating to lay there. Their uncontrollable laughter felt like the most rebellious thing Tweek had ever been a part of. To look in the face of so much anguish, and then make the choice to be happy, if even for tonight... it was the strongest he'd ever felt.

And the most guilty.

...

It was a few hours later when the house again fell silent and their pain returned to them. They picked up where they left off, staring at that cursed wall and muttering possibilities back and forth. They said the same things over and over again. What was different, what was the same. The answers they needed were just on the tips of their tongues, but they couldn't quite reach them.

"Okay," Kyle sighed as he ran a hand through his unruly hair. "Let's go over it one more time."

Tweek nodded in an effort to fight away a yawn.

"Well," Kyle huffs. "Craig's appearance is obviously what sets him apart. He looks nothing like the others, he wasn't killed like the others. He practically has nothing in common except where he was killed."

"And how he was taken," Tweek said in a tired, drawl tone.

"What?"

"You said the other boys were taken when they walked alone."

"Oh yeah, that too."

Tweek's face changed from blank to horrified. His mouth fell open and his eyes widened. Kyle was afraid it was something he was seeing, so he jerked around to make sure there wasn't some twisted figure hiding in his shadow. There was, of course, though that hadn't mattered.

Kyle couldn't see him, and Tweek had grown used to his face.

"What is it?" Kyle demanded as Tweek covered his mouth and leaned back against the grimy wall.

Tweek shook his head and ground his teeth together. "I... I don't want to do this anymore."

"What?" Kyle growled. "Why are you so spooked?"

"It doesn't matter," Tweek mumbled before turning and leaving the room. The door slammed behind him, but Kyle followed ruthlessly.

"Oh, no, you can't get rid of me that easy!" he shouted as he followed Tweek down the creaking stairs and into the kitchen. Tweek snatched his shovel off the tabletop and kept walking right out the back door. Of course Kyle was on his heels. Tweek didn't seem to notice the rain as he stormed into the woods. Kyle stood and watched with furrowed brows as Tweek drove the end of his shovel into the dirt.

"Tweek, we talked about this," Kyle hollered, though he was more confused than anything.

Tweek just kept digging. His shovel slammed violently into the mudding dirt, and he let out angered groans as he tossed shovelfuls over his shoulder.

When it swung back again, Kyle fisted it in his hand. Tweek jerked it forward, but Kyle's grip was strong.

"Let go, Kyle!"

"No! Dude, what the fuck? What's the matter with you?"

They struggled over it, pulling and yelling.

"Just talk to me!" Kyle begged with a pathetic crack in his voice.

"Leave. Me. Alone!" Tweek jerked the shovel so hard it ripped from Kyle's hands, leaving splinters and stinging behind.

Tweek stepped back. His heavy boots sank in mud as Kyle looked down at his reddening palms. Tweek's lips parted as if they'd wanted to smirk in victory, but his shovel felt too heavy to lift now.

Kyle stayed silent as he tried to rub the stinging out of his fingers. Water dripped down his cheeks. Maybe he could have blamed it on the rain, but Tweek saw the puffy redness in his eyes.

"Kyle, I..." Tweek tried to begin. Water splashed onto his pants when his shovel dropped to the ground.

"Tweek..." Kyle said again. He approached more cautiously this time.

"Just tell me what's wrong."

"...It's me."

There was silence.

"What?"

"Use that big brain of yours Kyle!" Tweek shouted. He was finally facing the other, because he was talking more with his hands than his words. "He picked up little boys with blond hair and blue eyes who were on the fucking streets alone."

"W-who do you know who looks like that? Who's house was he leaving?"

He gestured to himself, hands collapsing into his chest.

"It was... me. It was supposed to be me."

The only sound between them was the patter of rain in the leaves. Kyle's brows scrunched together. He shook his head as if to say that couldn't be true.

"It makes sense, right?" Tweek asked. He was smiling, but his lips trembled. "Doesn't it?"

It did. Everything seemed to just fall into place. Craig had died in Tweek's place- he had to've! And now here was Kyle.

Tweek remembered David and the rabbit. What they had said.

This path would lead to Tweek's death.

Kyle took another step closer. The rain beat down harder than before, and it felt freezing cold against his skin. He wrapped those aching hands around the loose front of Tweek's jacket.

"Tweek?"

If Kyle stayed ...

"What?"

He could die, too.

"We don't know for sure. There's still so much we're missing. If I could just get another vision than maybe-"

"No! No more visions. Just go home, Kyle."

"What?"

Tweek turned out of Kyle's grasp. He left his shovel in the mud as he walked back towards the house. Running away was all Tweek knew how to do. Even his digging felt like another way to hide. Kyle, however, was still just as much of a spitfire as the day they met.

"Let me help you!"

"I can't anymore! I'm... sorry," Tweek muttered clumsily. His face flushed a little at the confession.

"For what?" Kyle cried out. He was soaked by then.

"Everything," Tweek replied. "For being a raging asshole and for getting you caught up in all this!"

Kyle couldn't find the words he needed to reply. Water was in his eyes and his heart was too far up his throat.

"I'm going to be more honest with you than I've ever been with anyone," he continued, "I... I don't know how much longer I have left."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It doesn't matter- I just need you to listen to me."

"Okay..."

There's a silence unlike any they'd ever shared before.

"This whole town felt like traitors," he continued before gnawing on his bottom lip. "My parents didn't believe me, our friends all abandoned us, and no one wanted us. I spent every night for the last five years out here alone, and not one person ever came looking for me. No one.

"Except for you." Kyle swallowed at the intensity both in Tweek's words and on his face.

"I can't let you get hurt anymore."

And He Was Gone

He had Gym every morning, first thing. Tweek wasn't as enthusiastic about the class as many of his classmates were. Though he loved physical activity, he hated people. The last thing he wanted to do was strip down in front of a room full of them, so he would hide fully clothed in the showers until the tardy bell rang. Then, when he was sure the locker room would be devoid of all those nasty, sweaty bodies, he would make his way inside to change himself. He did this after Gym, too.

This plan worked well for him all year. Sure, he had detention every lunch period for all of his tardy slips, but he didn't mind. It meant sitting by himself in the computer lab, which was an added bonus.

That day didn't go according to plan.

It was a Monday, which meant he was already physically sore and mentally wrecked from all the digging he'd been doing the weekend prior. Mondays were not good days.

He was hiding in the furthest corner of the locker room after class when he heard shuffling and voices echo off of the lockers. He figured they didn't notice he was there, so he hurriedly ripped off his shorts and yanked his jeans out of the locker hanging open before him. He stuffed his legs in each hole as he pondered a way to slip out unnoticed.

"Don't touch me, you fucking jock conformists!" He heard someone hiss. The voice was high pitched and small, but vicious. He curled up his nose.

"Don't fucking talk shit, then!" shouted another voice, which was much deeper. Tweek didn't recognize either of them, and considered using this distraction to slip away. As the commotion escalated, he found himself more intrigued. Tweek peered around the cover of the locker row to get a view.

There was a boy on the other side. His hair was jet black; short in the back, long in the front. Everything about him was dark. From the black on his shoes to the eyeliner on his lids.

A goth kid, and a little one at that.

What disturbed Tweek more was the three much larger kids that had the black speck of a boy cornered. He spoke with venom and anger, but the wild look in his eyes was like a rabbit being hunted.

"Maybe we should teach this fag a lesson."

One of the bigger guys took a hold of the kid's shoulder and slammed him hard back into the locker. The goth choked out a breathless gasp at the blow, but stood defiantly.

Craig was not so composed. He was spitting and screaming, terrified, but angry. Tweek couldn't stand the fear on Craig's face. This was an unwelcome annoyance, but if something was scaring his tiny shadow he was sure as hell going to stop it.

This little goth was no older than ten. Probably only four years younger than Tweek was at the time. What was he even doing in the high school locker room, anyway?

"Hey," Tweek growled, stepping out from his hiding place to interrupt whatever the hell was going on.

The three boys turned around. Two of them were much bigger than he was. Upperclassmen, he assumed, but one was much shorter. Chubbier. He was wearing a red jersey and a dumbass expression.

Clyde.

Tweek immediately felt a rolling in his gut that made him want to throw up, but all he could manage was an oddly twisted grin.

What an interesting turn of events.

"What the hell do you want?" Asked the biggest one. Tweek didn't know his name, and he didn't care to. Dumbass Number One would have to suffice, and his equally as large buddy was Dumbass Number Two.

"For you to shut the hell up. All your bitching over here is pissing me off," Tweek spat. He tugged hard on the collar of his too-big button up shirt and twitched into a small convulsion. The more angry or frustrated he became, the harder it was to control his body.

The goth boy was still pressed up against the lockers, but an odd look of relief washed over his face. This, for some reason, pumped Tweek up even more.

"Dude, who do you think you are?" The biggest kid demanded, stepping forward.

"Wow, hold on," Clyde cried out. "That's Tweek man, he's-"

The look on his face was one of pure terror, and Tweek's grin spread like butter.

"Oh," Said Dumbass Number Two. He stood beside the biggest boy, and Tweek couldn't help but notice they bore a striking resemblance in body type. "That freak who talks to himself."

"No, dead people. He says he talks to dead people," corrected Dumbass Number One. The boy let out an irritatingly loud bout of laughter. "What are you going to do? Sick your little ghosts on me?"

Tweek assumed that was supposed to be a taunt, though it was a terribly childish one. For some reason, he couldn't shake the shit-eating grin he was wearing. That seemed to frustrate the boys more than anything.

"Craig isn't why you should be afraid of me," Tweek glowered. He slipped his bag off his shoulders and threw it to the ground beside him. Then, his fists raised. Why he was so eager to fight, he wasn't really sure. The idea of slamming his fists into something sounded like a good way to release all his pent up energy. There was also the idea of saving this boy. The goth boy who was still staring at him with wide, surprised eyes. For some reason, that ignited a flame in him. One that raged and burned with more hatred than he'd allowed himself to feel in a long time.

"Ohhh, he wants to fight," said Number Two. "Go on Fosse, kick his ass!"

The bigger of the two lunged forward, raising his fists as well. Tweek shot a look at the boy cowering behind them. One that was ordering him to slip away while they were distracted. The boy did so, albeit with hesitation.

Number One, who Tweek assumed was Fosse, charged at him with fists swinging. This guy may have been big, but he didn't strike with tact. Tweek ducked beneath him, and sent his clenched fist rocketing into Fosse's jaw.

The boy seemed shocked, and stumbled back while holding his face. Clyde almost looked like he was about to laugh, but Tweek shot him a glare so cold he was silenced completely.

"Why you little," Fosse spat with his lips curled in a snarl. It seemed Tweek bruised his ego better than he did his face, because he came charging back for more.

Tweek was slender, but all his work in the woods gave him a solid chest and a hard punch. He jumped away from the ogre's fist and planted his own into the side of his head.

Fosse screamed in fury, and his accomplice decided to play dirty. The sharp end of an elbow crashed into Tweek's ribs, catching him off guard. A gasp slipped out of him, and he stumbled back. This was a mistake, as he found himself pinned against the locker behind him. Dumbass Number Two had him by the arms.

"Clyde!" Tweek's captor barked. "Hold 'em!"

Hesitantly, he did as he was ordered.

"Good job, Bill," Fosse said. Tweek struggled with teeth bared and fists clutched to escape, but Dumbass Number Two (aka Bill, Tweek assumed), was too strong and Clyde was twisting his arm in a way that made it pop when he pulled on it. He could see Craig crawling down a locker behind Fosse, teeth bared and arms stretched everywhere. The little creature seemed terrified. So much so that he was frozen against the lockers. His tiny fingers convulsed in tremors and his limbs locked up in fear. He was too terrified of the other boys. Their sheer size alone made them comparable to grown men, and in the face of such a threat Craig was frozen.

This was a heartbreaking relief for Tweek.

Fosse came towards Tweek wearing a smile. One that said he was going to make Tweek pay for making a total idiot of himself in front of his friends, though he didn't need Tweek's help to do that.

He cracked his knuckles as he came closer. Tweek felt like a fly tangled in a spiderweb. The harder he struggled to escape, the tighter their grips were.

"Craig," Tweek's crazed grin returned to him. "It's going to be okay."

When Fosse got close enough to draw back his arm, Tweek kicked both his legs up off the floor and slammed them into his opponent's stomach. Fosse went tumbling back, and Tweek burst out into hysterical laughter.

Laughter that was quickly cut off by sharp knuckles crashing into his face. Fosse hadn't recovered, but Bill hit him hard enough to leave him dazed.

There was another blow. One to his chest that left him screaming curses, and another to his jaw that left his tongue bleeding. He looked to his left through a swelling eye to see Clyde still holding him down. There was a look on his face though. His mouth was twisted into a horrified line and his eyes were wet.

"Don't look so fucking concerned," Tweek choked after another blow to his stomach. "You're getting off on this."

Clyde didn't have the opportunity to respond, because someone else had joined them. A lot of someones.

Fosse whipped around when a long nail tapped him on the shoulder. The sound of a spray bottle

filled Tweek's ears, followed by Fosse's agonized screaming. He dodged away, holding his face and eyes. He wiped at them frantically, and the girl who had been standing behind him was smiling- a red can in her black clad grip.

She was heavy set, her plump lips painted with darkness and a wild look in her eyes that didn't set right on her composed face.

Bill looked like he was about to throw a fist at her, but someone quickly stepped to her defense. Someone who held a shiny switchblade they'd pulled from their pocket.

"Touch her and I spill your maggot infested guts, got it?" said the boy wielding the short blade. His hair was black, too, but curly.

The boys surrounding Tweek quickly realized they were now outnumbered. Four darkly dressed kids had slipped in behind them, and with Tweek quickly regaining himself, they would be up against five.

Bill and Clyde released their grip on Tweek, ran to Fosse, and made a break for it as Fosse spat curses and taunts no one cared enough to listen to.

Tweek tried to take a step forward, but ended up falling back against the lockers and sliding to the floor. He held his ribs and heaved. He could taste the crimson in his mouth and feel the swelling of his tongue. God, he really bit it good.

The light dimmed behind his puffy eyes. He opened them to find someone standing over him. The boy. The little goth boy. His hand was extended to Tweek, a silent offer of help. Tweek reached out his own, and the boy helped him stammer to his aching feet.

Craig was clinging to his back now. The tiny thing was shaking so hard it was rattling Tweek's bones.

He finally gazed around to realize he was surrounded by people. Four people. The tiny goth still holding his hand, a slightly taller goth with red dyed into his hair, an even taller goth that was still clutching to his switchblade, and the girl.

"You... brought help?" Tweek uttered around his swollen tongue.

The tiniest goth nodded, but the girl is the one who spoke up.

"You're some tough shit, aren't you?" she remarked. The black paint on her lips stuck a little when she spoke. It was probably because of how hard her grin was pressing them together. "We watched you beat the hell out of that guy."

"I think I'm the one who got beat the hell out of."

The girl's brown eyes slid up and down him before letting out a little laugh.

"Sure did, didn't you?" she cooed.

She was odd. Tweek decided he liked her.

"You won't have to worry about that anymore, though," she promised as she crossed her fishnet covered arms. "You're one of us, now."

...

"Kyle, I'm not so sure about this," Tweek admits with his eyes downcast. Their backs were pressed up against the siding of a house, their bodies cloaked in black like robbers. It wouldn't be the first time Tweek snuck into that house, but never before did he have such intentions.

"I still think it's a bad idea," Tweek added.

"Listen," Kyle let out a huff. Despite the strong will in his voice, he was just as anxious. "It doesn't matter. This is the only way."

This is the only way.

You'll never find him if you don't let me do this.

Just this once more, then I'll never ask about it again.

Those were the words Kyle convinced him with. Still, though, he hated the thought of Kyle suffering. He especially hated it if he was the cause. Now, there they were, shaking and anxious, shrouded in darkness. Lying in wait for one last desperate chance.

Tweek's pocket let out a buzzing sound, so he reached inside to extract his phone. The waiting was over.

"She says they're asleep," he muttered. "It's now or never."

Kyle nodded, and followed Tweek to a tree. It was ridiculously tall, like most every tree in town. Its long, thick branches sprouted in wild directions. One particularly hardy one reached for a window on the second floor.

"You aren't gonna tell me that's our way in," Kyle muttered. Tweek didn't even take the time to reply. He gripped onto lower limbs, and hoisted himself up without a problem. Soundlessly, Tweek's shadow snaked through leaves and twigs until he was perched on the thickest branch.

Seems Kyle couldn't match the Shadowman on anything when it came to physical capability.

"Jesus Christ," He grumbled as he stepped forward and tried to emulate Tweek. He was embarrassed to make such a fool of himself. He struggled even pulling himself onto the first branch.

"You need help?" Tweek teased from above him, a lopsided grin on his face.

Kyle grabbed for swaying branches in the darkness, silently celebrating when he finally hoisted himself up. Admittedly, he was heaving for breath and all out of balance by the time he clawed his way up to Tweek.

It took longer to climb the fucking tree than it would to find what they needed.

"You got some leaves in your hair," Tweek snorted. He was already crouched and on his way to the window. The mighty branch groaned softly under the weight of him.

"Better than the mud you're always covered in," Kyle retorted.

"Touché."

Kyle waited until Tweek was safely inside before attempting the same. After a few extra minutes and a couple near death experiences, Tweek had his arms around Kyle and was pulling him safely inside.

"Dear god, was there no better way?" Kyle complained.

"Nope, Craig's parents sleep on the bottom floor. I'd rather risk falling out of a tree than waking up Thomas."

"Is the guy that much of a prick?" Kyle pondered while pulling stray leaves out of his wild hair.

"Yes."

"Wonderful."

Kyle peeked around the closet they'd climbed into. It was too dark to take in much of anything, so he took a hold of Tweek's sleeve and let him lead the way.

The next room they enter is a bedroom. A child's bedroom, which is evident considering the small girl standing at her window waiting for them. "Hey, Tricia," Tweek greets. She runs to him, and then throws her arms around his middle in a tight hug. He pats the top of her head with a chuckle.

"It's nice to see you, too. Did you get it?"

Tricia stepped back and fished around inside her pajama shirt. From the front pocket, she pulled out a key.

"Of course. Tricia Tucker always keeps her promises," she reminded him with a small bow. "I'm just glad to help! What else am I gonna do?"

"Oh, um," Tweek stood for a moment, fiddling with the key as he tried to think of a way to politely tell her it'd be best if she kept her distance. He didn't want her to be there if Kyle were to go all white-eyed again.

"How about she be the lookout," Kyle offered.

"The look out?" Tricia asked. He folded her arms together, a bit of a skeptical look on her face.

"Yeah! It's only like, one of the most important jobs, right Tweek?"

Tweek stared blankly for a minute, and Kyle had to keep himself from laughing when Tweek's face visibly changed from 'what are you talking about' to 'oh god you're a genius'.

"I don't know," Tweek said, playing along. "That's kind of important-"

"I can do it!" Tricia chipped in.

Tweek rubbed the back of his neck as if he was mulling his choices over in his head.

"Well, alright. I need you to watch from your bedroom, if anybody starts stirring downstairs, I need you to text me and tell us to get out of there, alright?"

"Alright!" Tricia agreed while clasping her hands together.

"Otherwise, we'll be back," Tweek said. He patted her head with a gloved hand, and then Kyle and Tweek wandered out into the hallway.

They were headed for the very next door down the hall. The white one with a padlock bolted into its trim. Tweek approached it slowly, gripping the key in his hand. He thought this should be easy. Just drop in, get what they needed, then leave. He didn't expect to feel so choked up and... afraid.

"You okay?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah," Tweek lied as he rubbed his sweating hands, key and all, against his jeans.

"Now or never, I guess..."

He gripped the padlock and shoved the key inside. It was a perfect fit, and it turned smoothly before popping open. Kyle and Tweek took a moment to peer at one another.

"Listen, Tweek. If you can't go in there it's okay-"

"No," Tweek assured his friend. "I have to."

Kyle squeezed Tweek's shoulder in assurance as Tweek took a firm hold of the handle. It squeaked when it was turned, probably a bi-product of how long it's gone untouched. The door was equally as whiny. It was almost nerve wracking the noise it made.

Craig's parent's slept in the room right below them. Tweek was sure the Tuckers would come barreling up the staircase with bats in their hands any moment. Luckily, however, there were no screams of concern after the door was left gaping open.

There was only silence.

With one steadying breath, Tweek took a step inside. He was hit with weird waves of feeling he hadn't expected. The baby blue walls were the same as they were in his faded memories. Little glow in the dark stars were still pasted onto the ceiling, though some had fallen onto the floor.

It wasn't the familiarity of the room that was tearing him up, though. It was just how untouched everything had been. It's all just as it was the last time Tweek had been there as a child. Craig's bed was still messy and unmade, left as it was when Craig threw off his covers and prepared for his last day. His little space-themed pajamas were still strewn across his floor, and a model plane was left abandoned mid construction atop his white dresser.

He was filled with the oddest urge to touch everything he saw. To feel what little pieces of Craig still existed in their world. The toys he played with, the bed he slept in, the walls he surrounded himself with. Kyle followed meekly behind his friend as Tweek wandered deeper into the room. Above the desk harboring Craig's unfinished airplane was a cork board and on that cork board were tacked pictures and papers. Kyle's eyes scanned over them.

They were of kids he recognized from school, though their faces were much younger. Token Black, Clyde Donovan, Craig himself, and Tweek. This was the wall of a little boy who loved his friends.

"He always had a camera with him," Tweek uttered as if he'd just remembered. "I wouldn't be surprised if all his drawers are filled with pictures."

"What else did he like to do?" Kyle asked.

"Well..." Tweek moved across the room, away from Kyle and towards the bed. Someone decided to take up residence there since Kyle last glanced at it. A small, grimy body was pressed into the blue covers. Craig. Or at least what he had become.

"He liked to sneak out on the roof at night and tell me about stars."

The convulsing boy making a home out of his bed sheets did not at all resemble who he'd been in life. Kyle couldn't help but marvel at how strong of a person Tweek really was. To be able to look

at that mutilated apparition with a smile- it took courage.

Nonetheless, Tweek cleared his throat. "We have to stay on track. We don't have much time."

"Oh, right," Kyle uttered. His eyes scanned the room as Tweek watched.

"So how do you know what to touch?" Tweek pondered.

"I dunno," Kyle admitted. "Sometimes I get urges to touch things, other times it happens on accident."

"So are you just going to walk around his room in a circle and run your hands over everything?"

Kyle snorted, then whispered, "If all else fails."

About fifteen minutes later, Tweek was about sure all else was indeed failing. Kyle would touch something, his eyes would roll back, and he'd stand motionless for a moment, only to blink, shake his head, and then go onto some other thing. It was the oddest process of elimination Tweek ever saw, but Kyle was focused.

He was also in awe.

Typically, things only talked to him when they had sad stories to tell. Craig's room only wanted to talk about things that made him happy. Each voice that graced his ears and image that settled in his eyes were full of groggy good mornings and late night conversations between cherished friends.

This room was a kind one.

He finally made it to the foot of Craig's bed. The one his restless spirit was still laying in. Kyle ignored him as he ran his fingertips over the wood of the foot-board, and then across the fabric of a blue jacket that had been hanging from it.

"Tweek?" Kyle heard a voice ask. "It's too cold outside. Take this."

Kyle squeezed the fabric a little tighter, but nothing else came of it. Honestly, though, the more and more he would touch Craig's things the more and more he heard about Tweek. It appeared Craig loved him just as much in life as he still did in death.

Kyle backed away when a few of Craig's curious hands reached for him. Craig was in a playful mood, but Kyle didn't have time for it.

Kyle's fingers lead him across the room, where they longed to stroke the top of Craig's dresser and fumble around in a basket nearby. It was blue and wicker, deep enough to Craig to stuff at least six inches of misplaced things into. His fingers fiddled and searched until the tips scraped against something slick and small.

Craig was still on his bed, but he wasn't alone. Kyle could see him there, cheeks pink and eyes bright blue. There was another person beside him. They were holding one another as Craig sniffled into his companion's chest. A hand found the back of Craig's hat and squeezed him close.

On the bed at their feet was a shoe box. It was taped closed with writing scrawled across the top. Kyle couldn't get a good view of the words, but he did hear voices. He couldn't shift towards them. He only stared blankly at that little box as they spoke around him.

"I don't know what I did wrong," A tiny voice whimpered, choking around tears and saliva.

"You didn't do anything wrong," the other voice assured him. "He was getting old."

"He was only f-four," Craig managed to blurt, though crying came immediately after. "He had another year, at least!"

The sound of a hand gently patting the crying boy's back met Kyle's nonexistent ears.

"We can't always control these things," The other voice whispered. "Sometimes things... well, they die. And it's nobody's fault. I mean, maybe he only had four years, but they were a great four years, and it was because you loved him. You gave him a good life."

There was more crying. It was heavy and wet, but Kyle still couldn't turn his head. Just the box. The tiny coffin for a tiny creature.

"It's okay," his friend weakly assured him through his grieving. "You can cry all you need to."

And Craig did. It felt like an endless loop of sniffles and choked whines before anyone spoke again.

"Are you ready? We'll do it together," the voice asked.

There was a pause before Craig replied with a miserable, "Yeah... I guess so."

There was a creaking and shifting in the bed. A small pair of hands laid themselves down on the box. Kyle could see knees, too. Clad in cushy spaceship fabric.

"Oh... c-can I say something dumb?" Craig ponders, his hands shaking on the cardboard lid.

"Yeah, of course."

"I... I wish I could have told him how much he meant to me, you know? I wish he could have understood," A hand leaves the box, Kyle guesses to wipe away the wetness on his face. "So, I just want to tell you that someday... When we-"

Craig chokes up again. A trebling sob breaks out of him as he continues on, "When we're old, and if- if I go like Stripe, I want you to know that what time I had was great because- cause-"

Kyle presses his lips tightly together, his own eyes budding with wetness.

"Because you were thereand-"

That was it, that's all Craig said before his friend pulled him into a tight embrace. He could see the person's face now, and he wasn't at all surprised to find a blue eyed boy with light colored hair. Tweek was there, as he was every day before and every day since.

Kyle took a step back when the color of his eyes returned to him. Tweek was right beside him, which almost caused Kyle to jump out of his skin. Those hard, blue eyes were scanning him expectantly, but Kyle only pressed his lips together and shook his head. Whatever he managed to touch in that little bowl wasn't what beckoned him to it in the first place. There was something else there, lingering in the bottom, waiting to tell him its secrets.

Craig must have known this, because he'd shifted on the bed until he was leaning over the footboard, glowering at Kyle with those gross sockets. A mess of puss and congealed blood dripped from the face. It oozed out of his nose and mouth, which left a dreadful mess on the floor and on his sheets.

They were both staring at him. Waiting.

He trembled away the prickle in his spine to take another step forward. And again, his hand dove into the collection of coins and old bracelets. Finally, at the bottom, his hand was met with a thick plastic square. When he pulled on it, the yellow and black item surfaced from the junk that concealed it. A camera. An old camera.

He turned it over in his hands.

"What are you doing?" he heard a deep, angry voice bark. It startled him so much that he jerked around with his heart racing. He was so sure Craig's father would be seething in the doorway, but the voice was coming from Kyle's hands. Not his ears.

"W-I was- Nothing! I just wanted to get my camera and-"

"And what's that? On the floor behind you?"

Kyle felt the oddest breathlessness he ever experienced. Like a fist held onto each of his lungs and squeezed.

"It's- I don't know. It was in the wall and I just-"

Kyle knew this was Craig's voice. It was distorted with horror.

"Did you look inside?" the man demanded.

Kyle couldn't see the scene like he did in other visions. Just images that flashed in his eyes. Images that went away when he blinked. A closet door he didn't recognize. The silhouette of a large man standing before a bright light.

Kyle felt so small.

"N-no," Craig's tiny voice squeaked, but he was lying.

"Then why are you so shook up?" Suddenly, this man sounded more amused than angry.

There was a white photo album with a brown smudge stained on one of its corners. There were pictures inside. They were of other boys who all looked the same, but they weren't any kind of pictures a child should have seen. Let alone been the subjects of.

Craig was afraid of them.

Kyle was, too.

"How about this, we'll call it a secret," the man said, still lighthearted and somewhat pleased by this turn of events, "Remember, though. There are punishments for tattle tales in this house. There are for nosy little boys, too."

Craig's breath was rapid and his insides were twisting into painful, nasty knots. He slid back farther into the closet as if he could hide himself, but he was just as helpless as all the others.

Kyle's hands were shaking so badly the camera slipped from his grasp and thudded against the carpet beneath him. Was that it? Was that their answer?

"Kyle?" Tweek's voice pondered in worry. "What did you see?"

"It's someone we know!" Kyle choked out in a rushed breath. "It's someone Craig knows! He found something he shouldn't have- in a closet, it was an album! but he got caught!"

"By who, Kyle?" Tweek demanded.

"I... I didn't see his face, but I think-"

Kyle didn't have a chance to finish. Tweek's phone started ringing. Vibration after vibration left his heart pounding and his eyes darting around the room.

"Oh, fuck," Tweek growled. "That must be Tricia. Thomas is coming - you have to get out of here."

"Tweek, wait! I think-"

"You have to go Kyle - now!"

Tweek shoved him towards Craig's bed and demanded he hide there until it was safe enough to climb out Craig's window.

"There's a roof beneath it. You can climb down the column just fine from there."

"But Tweek!" Kyle spat in anger and frustration as he found himself shoved under the bed-frame.

"We'll talk about it in the woods!" Tweek hissed.

They both went silent as they heard the creaking of door nearby. Tweek stood up ridged and straight, his muscles tightening and his lungs seizing up. Thankfully, the man that appeared in the doorway didn't run in swinging a bat like Tweek feared, but the angry daggers in his eyes were somehow much worse.

"What the fuck!" Kyle heard a voice scream in rage. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?!"

Tweek didn't reply. Kyle could see his boots from his hiding place. They stood defiant against the barrage of curses.

"What? What's happening?" Another voice asked. It was female, but much older than Tricia.

"It's that fucking Tweek kid, what did I tell you? What did I say?" The man then turned his rage towards Tweek, who was inching backwards. "Do you want to go to jail tonight? I told you not to ever come back here again!"

"Calm down, Thomas," His wife demanded. "You didn't even ask what's going on!"

"That doesn't matter, Laura! H-he! He broke into our house! I'm calling the fucking police."

There were heavy footsteps leading out of the room, but lighter ones quickly followed. "No, Thomas!" Laura pleaded. They stormed into the hallway, where their screaming sounded only like muffled noise to Kyle. He was about to scoot closer to the commotion, but Craig curiously hung over the side of his mattress to peer at Kyle underneath.

Tweek's boots didn't move as the warring couple fought outside. He patiently awaited his fate, but he took another step back when the loud footsteps stomped back into the room.

There was deep, heavy breathing of a furious man. "I don't know why the hell you feed yourself fucked up fantasies, and I don't know why you chose my family to terrorize," Thomas snarled, his

voice guttural. "But I swear to God if you even as much as speak to any of us again I'm hauling your ass to jail."

"Thomas," Tweek finally spoke, his voice careful and soft. "I know you don't believe me, but please just listen this once. I swear to you all I've ever tried to do is help."

The quivering desperation in Tweek's voice was enough to break Kyle's heart. This is one of only two times he'd heard Tweek speak with such sincerity. It was his last trembling plea to be understood.

"Help? How the fuck do you think breaking into my son's room in the middle of the damn night classifies as help?" Thomas bellowed. "All you've done since day fucking one is upset my wife and fill my daughter's head with your crackpot delusions!"

"But Craig is-!"

"Craig is dead!" Thomas interrupted. "My son has been gone for five years, boy. He is not ever coming back, so stop shoving your nose where it doesn't fucking belong."

Kyle could almost see the frustration on Tweek's face, though he doesn't bother replying.

"Never come back here again, do you understand me? Stay out of my house, away from my family, and don't you ever speak of my son again! I won't hesitate to throw your ass in jail next time you show your face around here."

Kyle wanted to crawl out from under the bed and absolve Tweek of all the blame. This was Kyle's idea. An Idea Tweek tried to talk him out of. He knew better, though. It would only make the situation a million times worse.

"Fine," Tweek growled. "But just so you know, you're the one who should still be looking for him, not me. You're a shitty fucking excuse for a father."

"Get out. Now."

And Tweek did. His boots shuffled across the star speckled carpet and out the door. Craig whimpered at being left behind. His bones warped and cracked as he crawled in Tweek's direction, leaving Kyle hiding alone under the bed.

Thomas still stood by the door. Kyle could see his wide feet sinking into a RedRacer rug. He seemed to be contemplating, but soon followed the others. Craig's light flicked off, and the door shut tightly closed. Metal rubbed together until Kyle heard a loud click. It was again locked closed, and Kyle felt safe enough to climb out from his hiding place and make a break for the window.

He had to get to Tweek as soon as he could.

"We'll talk about it in the woods," he'd said. But when?

Kyle climbed onto the black shingled roof, shut the window behind him with a frustrated groan, and then attempted to follow Tweek's instruction to climb onto the porch below.

He promptly fell off of the roof.

Thankfully, thick bushes caught his fall. It still hurt more than movies led him to believe. He'd lost his breath on impact, and thorns ripped at him as he struggled to roll out of the mess. Once freed from the greedy claws of the Tuckers shrubbery, he wandered quickly off the property and into a

neighbor's yard. Darkness was the perfect cover, so he sat against the side of the house and pulled thorny twigs out of his black sweater.

He had a suspect, now.

The trouble was, he'd just put Tweek face to face with him.

That Sinking Feeling

The room was cold. Like always. Craig shivered and tried to roll over, but he ached so badly it left him wincing. The mattress creaked beneath him. His arms ached and stung. His only relief was they were no longer bound above his head. He took the opportunity to slowly stretch them out. His muscles burned and ached with every movement. It was like a thousand hot needles pricking underneath his skin. He hissed quietly, but that quickly came to a stop when the bare body beside him let out a sound and shifted.

His breath caught in his throat and he held it there.

That repulsive body was still breathing heavy. There was a big, chaffed hand invading the bruised flesh of Craig's belly. He could smell the man's musk and taste the salt forced onto his tongue. The boy's face twisted in abhorrence of the memory, but it hurt too bad to keep it that way.

Little boy? Little boy, can you hear me?

Craig tipped his head. It bumped against the hard wood of the headboard behind him but he didn't even so much as flinch.

"Were saving you," a voice said.

Craig slowly shook his head. Didn't they realize they had to be quiet? One yelp and Craig's unwelcomed visitor would hurt him all over again.

"Go away," Craig whispered under his horse breath. *"Please."*

"Don't you want to live?" Asked the voice.

"Yes, don't you?" whispered another.

He heard the sound of creaking somewhere above him. It almost made him cry at first. It was the familiar sound of that damned door, but he shivered to think he shouldn't be afraid of it. The person who usually shoved it open was sleeping beside him.

He heaved a little, and then slowly nodded his head to the voices.

He felt hands run across his toes, which made him flinch a little. The fingers were small and wet, but he didn't have enough mind to think too much about that.

"Come, sn mo 1 1 o J."

A similar small pair of cold hands found the underside of his ribcage. The pure chill from them edged his shaking form up. The intrusive hand slid down his belly and onto the bed. It felt refreshing to be free of the touch.

His legs hung down over the side of the mattress. His back ached and his legs felt like noodles. He opened his mouth to whisper, but nothing came out. *"Shh, shh,"* One voice murmured in the shell of his ear. *"Don't speak,"* He obliged, and let the flock of cold hands help him stand from the bed. At first, this proved to be a difficult task. Standing on his feet again for the first time in a long time, he stumbled and tripped. He caught his fall with his elbows, and they cracked against the stone floor. Bloody and stinging, he let out a sharp whimper. The man in bed behind him didn't stir, but he contemplated crawling back up onto the mattress before his captor punished him.

"It's okay," One edged on quickly. "Stand, stand, go."

Shakily, he tried. Their voices lead him around the empty room until his quivering fingers found wood. His palms reached out to touch the splintered edge of a staircase. He swallowed hard, but the voices urging him on didn't give him a moment's rest. On his hands and knees he painstakingly crawled up one step after another.

"There you go," a voice uttered triumphantly. "That's it- đ ố ã 'τ § τ ố ρ !"

He kept climbing upwards until his bruised palms found the soft plush of carpet. The air around him somehow smelled so different. It was fresh and earthy, and he could hear the branches of trees creaking and the tweeting of birds. He sucked in a thick breath, and then coughed.

"No, no, don't stop now," said one voice.

"Yes, you have to get up and go," said another.

The hands returned to him, grabbing a hold of his chaffed wrists and pulling him out of the hole he'd been in. Despite all the things he could hear and smell the night was still just as black around him as it had ever been.

The voices lead him stumbling out of a front door.

He stood on wobbling legs, then smiled to himself. The grass between his toes. The humming songs of forest creatures. It was all so real. He heard them all around. He decided to listen to the voices, though, and began to trudge onward with their hands guiding his way. He only just felt trees pass by him when he heard a booming crash resonate from behind.

"Oh no," Said a voice. "Is that-?"

"Yes," Cried another voice. "sl!!"

"R&U&N!" they all screamed together, shoving Craig forward so hard he stumbled and fell into a tree. The sound of wood slamming together boomed from behind him, along with a chorus of angry screaming children.

Oh, god. He'd been found out. He knew he should have just got back into bed when he had the chance.

"Craig!" a deep voice snarled. He heard his name echo through the trees, but his legs shook too badly to carry him forward. Should he go back and beg for forgiveness? The punishment might not be as painful, but the thought of being punished again at all...

He fell to the leaf covered forest floor and crawled away as quickly as he could. Bushes tugged at him and thorns prickled into the palms of his hands, but he didn't stop. He choked out a whimper when the humming of the forest animals were silenced with one loud, infuriated scream.

He was no longer free.

Gritting his teeth, he continued on under the thorns and into the woods. He didn't have to get up and run on his useless legs if he could hide. The darkness in itself should have been enough to protect him, but he dragged himself under a bush for good measure.

Twigs snapped all around as a pair of boots stomped through the underbrush. At first they were far away, but as seconds turned into gut churning minutes, they got closer and closer.

The crunching had stopped so nearby he thought the man could be standing over him. He held his breath to silence his panting. He would have squeezed his eyes closed, too, if he had any to begin with.

A sharp pain flooded him. The spiked bottoms of those boots slammed down onto his hand with a crack. The dryness in his throat couldn't hold back the booming scream that poured out of his mouth. He pulled back and rolled over under the brush, clutching his hand to his chest.

Those big hands came rolling in right after him. They grabbed at his shirt and dragged him across the leaves and thorns. He kept screaming, as if someone just might hear him.

"Help!" he screamed wildly to the night. "Help me! I've been!-"

The screaming continued even after a hand found its way overtop his mouth. It wasn't his own, he realized. It was the chorus. It was the others. They were so absurdly loud he thought it would burst his eardrums right out of his skull.

The man, however, was not disturbed by them. Craig wondered if he could hear them at all. He lifted Craig up off the ground, and the grass was no longer between his toes. When he tasted the familiar, brackish flavor of flesh against his dry teeth, only one thought crossed his mind.

He could not go again without feeling the grass. He opened his mouth as wide as he could, and bit down hard on the skin. His teeth pierced flesh and sank down into meat, and another scream joined in with all the others.

He did again feel the grass, but only after his ribs cracked and splintered against the trunk of a tree. He'd been slammed into it so hard he couldn't breathe. He fell to the ground in shock at the feeling of his brain rattling around inside his skull. Then, a strong grip grabbed him around his ankles. He tried to kick, but there was no strength left in him. He could only roll onto his side and try to shake off the painfully tight fist he was in the mercy of.

"Stop!" A voice screamed as Craig was dragged across the ground. It came from his mouth, though not from his ^mlungs. He'd never felt such a thing.

"No, no. ~~N~~^O!"

He was again in the air, and then heaved up over a broad shoulder. His breath was gone, and the grass was gone. He still couldn't even see it. He couldn't at all.

Craig nearly found himself back on the ground when his attacker bent over. The sound of the door banged, and Craig shivered. He could feel the musty air wash over him before he was even forced back down into that room. Wood creaked beneath boots, and children screamed like monsters in the black behind them. Their cold hands gripped at Craig. They grabbed at his clothes and his shoulders, His arms and his feet. They latched onto him as if they could rip him away from that room. Away from that man. Away from the inevitable fate none of them could escape.

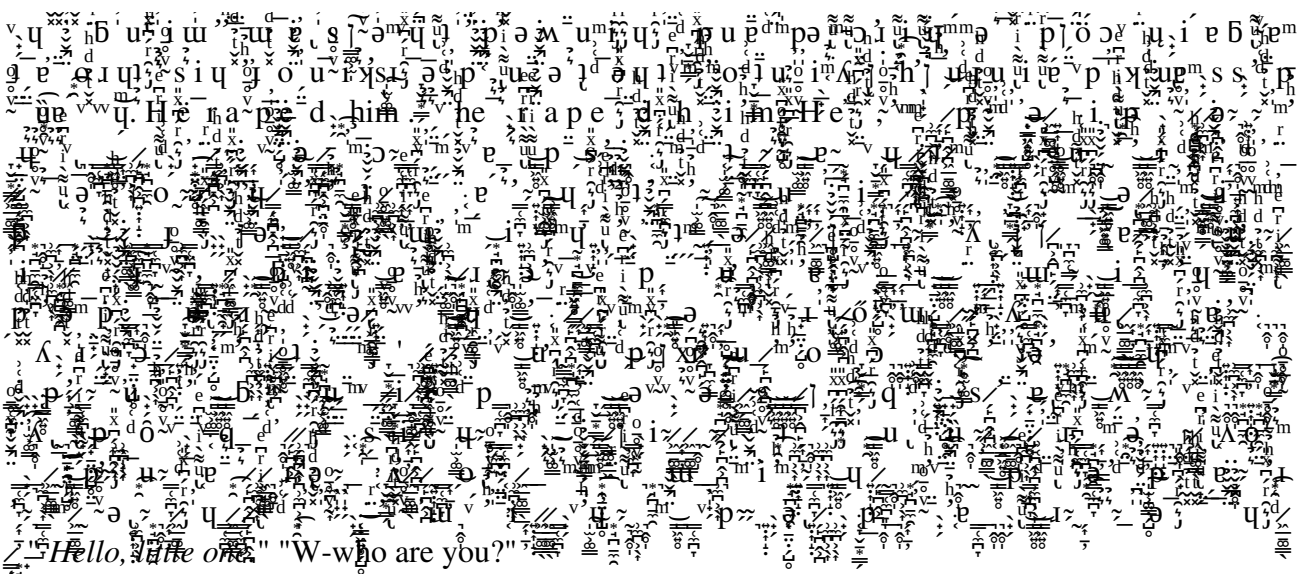
He heaved out a breath when he was thrown onto the stone floor. He cried out, tears pricking his eyes, as his aching ribs hit the creaking mattress.

This time he didn't have the energy to fight anymore. He just laid there with his breath low and shallow. Dark. All he could see was dark.

"Please," he heard himself plead around the blood in his mouth. "Don't hurt me again."

The man was quiet. Usually, that gruff, nasty voice wouldn't shut up. All Craig wanted since his

[illegible]



"Hello, little one." "W-who are you?"

"A dog," It said. That didn't make any sense.

"It hurts."

"I know, child. I know. That's why I've come to take you home."

"Home?..."

"Yes. *With me.*"

"But... I can't."

"Oh? And why not? Do you miss your mother?"

"Yes, but... Tweek," a tiny voice pleaded in the nothingness that surrounded it. "Let me warn him."

"I cannot. To be granted that power I must make you into something terrible."

"I already am."

...

Kyle was still picking twigs out of his hair by the time he showed up for school the next morning. His outrageous mop was infuriating for more than one reason. He stood in front of his locker, trying to stuff his unruly mane up under his hat before his first class started.

His phone was singing with text messages, like always, but he already knew they were all from Kenny. He's been trying too hard to get a hold of Kyle for the last few days. Missed calls and voice-mail littered his notifications, but he wasn't ready to talk yet. Honestly, he wasn't sure if he ever would be.

Maybe it was best for Kenny if Kyle just stayed out of his life. He was a shit friend, anyway. That fact was proven time and time again. First Stan, then Kenny, and now Tweek. Trying to be a good friend always ended up making things a hundred times worse.

Exhibit one being the mess he got Tweek into the night before. Sneak into the Tucker's house? What on earth was Kyle even thinking?

He dragged a couple heavy text books out of his locker. Between them he hid Tweek's composition

book. With all the emotional shit going on around him he hadn't had time to finish reading it.

His phone was still vibrating in his pocket when he turned to head to class. It vibrated still, even when an angry hand grabbed him by the shoulder and slammed him back against his locker. His books went tumbling onto the floor- along with his precious notebook.

"Ouch!" he complained while rubbing his arm. "What the hell is your-"

When he looked up his mouth went too dry to finish his sentence. There were four people surrounding him. Their bodies were clad in blackness, and they wore sneers.

Kyle licked his lips before cautiously uttering, "What do you want?"

The smallest of the flock stepped forward. He was the youngest, but by far the most lethal.

"Where is he?" the boy growled around his tight jaw.

"... Who?" Kyle dared to ponder.

By then some of the kids still lingering in the hall stopped to watch. Some looked on in distant concern, and others had hunger in their eyes. Kyle didn't notice any of this.

"Spooks, you dumbass!" Firkle, the tiny goth, shouted. "He was supposed to come by Pete's place in the morning, but he didn't show."

"I," Kyle stammered. Why the hell were they harassing KYLE about Tweek ditching them?
"Maybe he slept in, I don't know."

Firkle took Kyle by the front of his orange jacket and slammed him back against his locker once more. His ribs ached from where he'd fallen off the roof the night before, but with the clench of his jaw held in a yelp of pain.

"You listen here you little shit," Firkle hissed. "He was scared about something last time we talked. You were the last person he was with last night, where is he?"

"I really don't know," Kyle admitted with his teeth gritting together. He didn't bother to ask how Firkle knew about last night's shenanigans. "We kind of got split up."

"Hey, hey!" a passerby shouted. "let go a' him!"

Firkle's grip was broken when someone else wedged themselves between the two. A blond boy wearing a blue turtleneck sweater. Kyle's chest fluttered at the realization Butters came to his defense. The little goth didn't seem too happy about it, but took a step back anyway.

"This isn't your business," the boy hissed.

"W-well, you can't just go throwin' people in lockers!" Butters stammered out. "You're gonna hurt him!"

The goths exchanged looks of annoyance, but all came to the same conclusion without uttering a word. They turned together and morphed into the dwindling crowd of students, disappearing from sight.

"Thanks, Butters," Kyle sighed as he knelt down to collect his scattered books.

"No problem, Kyle. Well, I wonder what got into them," Butters said.

"Who knows," Kyle replied, but his stomach was doing flips. Why were they so worried? Tweek was probably just out in the woods today- like he told Kyle he would be. Their last conversation rung in his mind, though.

"I don't have much longer left," Tweek had said.

"You okay?" Butters's voice drug him out of his worry. "You know, we haven't heard from ya since you and Ken had at it the other day."

"Oh, yeah. I've been alright. Just really busy trying to catch up with school and all that."

Butters smiled a little, then nodded. "Yeah, I could tell you've been really stressed out lately."

Kyle leaned back against his locker. They had a few more minutes before they had to head to class, and it felt nice to talk to someone. Even if it was just idle chit-chat.

"So... how's Kenny?" He finally asks.

"Oh! Ken, he's doing... okay, I guess."

"Just okay?"

"Well, I mean he misses ya a lot. I think he's worried about you."

Kyle frowns at that last sentence, but he's not surprised. With how many unanswered texts he'd been getting he figured Kenny was scared he was dead in a ditch or something.

He looked up at Butters' face. His friend was watching him carefully, but he wasn't uneasy.

"Honestly, I kind of worry about him, too," Kyle admitted.

"Why don't you tell him that?"

"Because," Kyle huffed, then ran a hand across his forehead. "Cartman was right. I'm awful to him. I never once thought about how all of this was hurting him, or you, or even Cartman. I'm just a shitty friend."

"Okay, but Eric said that, not Kenny," Butters pointed out. "If you feel bad for not thinking about Kenny before, well, maybe it's time you think about him now."

Kyle sighed, "You're right, yeah. Maybe I'll message him back later. I just need a little more time..."

Time for what? Kyle didn't know. What he did know, though, was Kenny was okay. He was living a normal life with normal friends and normal problems. Kyle was the opposite of that, and there was someone else who needed him a little more right now.

Someone he desperately needed to talk to again.

...

When Kyle approached the house in the woods that night he thought he knew what to expect. He'd find Tweek within, walking back in forth in thought or asleep on the floor somewhere. That's where he always was - alone in the woods. Alone in that house. He needed to see him, and immediately. If Thomas really was the man behind all this terror they needed to formulate a plan.

When Kyle reached for the back door, though, the decaying wooden slab wouldn't budge. He blinked in bewilderment. After trying again to push it open, Kyle realized it had been locked from the inside.

His nerves were getting to him by that point, but he wasn't worried. At least he didn't show it. He gripped the handle. He heaved his shoulder into the wood which bent and cracked against the pressure. He slammed his shoulder again and again into the door until he was left nearly tumbling inside. The sliding lock busted off its rusted hinges. Kyle had to take a moment to steady himself before pressing on into the house.

"Tweek?" Kyle called with no answer.

It wasn't until he reached the living room stairs that he began to realize something was amiss. Upon the cracking dark wood were splotches. Browning smudges he knew hadn't been there before.

Kyle's heart sped up in his chest. He gripped the railing and snuck up the sullied staircase. It wasn't until he reached the top his heart truly dropped. The brown splotches he saw on the stairs became a still red streak across the hallway floor. A streak that disappeared beneath the door to their investigation room. Said door was shut tight, but Kyle's panic took away whatever logical thinking he had left in him. He ran to it, gripped the muddy knob, and threw the door open. It banged against the wall like Kyle's heart banged against his ribs.

The room had been destroyed. Their table was flipped and missing legs. The single metal chair that once sat beside it had been thrown against a wall across the room, leaving the rusted metal broken and the wall itself punctured. It looked as if there was a fight here, and someone obviously lost.

And their wall.

The wall of faces and articles and notes - it had been ripped and torn at. Some of their papers could be found scattered about the hardwood floor. The rest were missing.

Kyle was so shocked he couldn't move. He could only stare blankly at the disheveled room around him, like his brain couldn't even comprehend the idea that Tweek wasn't waiting there for him.

His face changed from lost to horrified when he noticed something under his shoe. He lifted his foot, then pressed the red cloth open with the tip of his boot.

There was no close friend waiting for him there, and there may never be again. There was only a red bandanna; speckled with the grizzly mess on the floor.

Nobody Came

Kyle could do nothing but stand in that doorway with his trembling hand over his mouth. He wanted to scream. He wanted to tear through the house, through the woods, through all of town, until he had Tweek beside him. His legs wouldn't move, though, and all his throat would do was knot up. He fell back against the wall, just taking in the destruction around him.

To his knees he fell, and then he took Tweek's bandanna in his hands. He squeezed it. His jaw clenched.

"Show me," He begged through his tightened teeth. He squeezed the fabric until his knuckles were white. "Please."

When the cloth gave him nothing his eyes began to water.

"Show me what happened to him!" He screamed, but it didn't want to talk. Nothing in that room did. He ran his fingers over the bloody floor, the destroyed wall, the overturned table. He crawled on his hands and knees, touching everything, but it was all quiet.

His guts tied up in knots as his fingers slid over the blood speckled floor. Tweek wouldn't have gone down easily. Even grown men would have trouble getting the upper hand on him. Unless, of course, they were considerably larger.

Like Thomas.

Was this Kyle's fault?

His eyes were pricking with water, and his face was scrunched in frustration. Kyle gritted his teeth together so hard it was painful.

He finally forced himself to stand. He mindlessly followed the speckled trail down the stairs, but there were no more clues at the bottom of it. He held tightly to Tweek's bandanna and stepped onto the porch, then off of it. The ground was soft from all the rain, but there were no footprints except his own.

"Tweek!" he screamed into the woods.

His jaw was clenched tightly together. His fists squeezed until his nails dug into the flesh of his palms. This was all his fault. If only he'd listened to Tweek and left when he told him to. If only he hadn't pushed it so far. If only Thomas hadn't caught them in Craig's room. That had to be why this was happening.

"Tweek!" he screamed again, louder this time.

Tweek couldn't answer him anymore.

Kyle should have known this, but his head couldn't catch up to his heart. His legs forced him forward. More shrill, desperate pleas echoed off of trees.

"Show me!" He wailed. They knew. Everything around him knew.

Craig's disappearance was recorded in the grass. Tweek's last desperate battle replayed in the energy of the ground and the bark. This supernatural power he possessed was all he had left, but it

was resisting him. He still didn't understand it. Why sometimes things happened and other times they didn't, but he would force it to if he had no other choice.

"I said show me!" He spat. "Fucking show me!"

He was blinded by the darkness, his tears, and also pictures. His feet tingled beneath him. A chill washed over his body. It felt like a heavy door he had to force open, and he was pushing as hard as he could.

He extended his hands from his sides and ran them through the foliage around him. Every bush he bumped into whispered to him stories. Every breath of air was from someone else's lungs.

It was different somehow. Different than all the times he'd beckoned for it before. This time, it hurt.

Trying to ignore the sudden invasion of pain, he focused on Tweek. Maybe if he just pushed himself a little harder, dug a little deeper, he could find the exact moment he needed replayed. Maybe when he fell through that door he would be able to see Tweek on the other side.

When he finally left it gaping open, though, It wasn't Tweek he found.

Something else was near. Something that scarred this forest more than anything else it had seen. It was evil, and it was buzzing in his eye sockets.

"Craig!" a deep voice snarled.

A cry tore painfully from Kyle's throat. His eyes were so clouded by everything the trees around him had seen before he couldn't see what they were now. They were polluted with the echoing of familiar laughter and thousands of stranger's voices. Every word that had ever been spoken amongst their trunks poured into Kyle's mind and brought him to his knees.

A white sheen covered the green in his eyes. His muscles jerked and his brain was shocked into numbness. Still, he crawled forward on his stomach. Trembling fingers dug into mud and roots to pull his body forward.

Through the wall of overwhelming voices, one was much louder than all the rest.

"Please." It was a fearful whisper, but it exploded through Kyle's head. "Help me!"

Kyle lifted his head from the dirt he was crawling through. It wasn't Tweek, but it was still somehow familiar.

His hazy vision caught the shape of a boy.

The child wore a white night shirt that was much too big for him, along with a worn pair of blue jeans. A large hand squeezed around his upper arm, and only then did it occur to Kyle that the boy was struggling.

It wasn't real. It was just another sad piece of the past that his hands showed him through the ground. Still, Kyle bit his bottom lip while forcing his numb body towards them.

"I'm so sorry, I am. I won't tell, I promise!" the boy sobbed while pulling at the fingers hurting him.

Kyle's breath caught in his throat when another hand jerked to slap the boy across the face.

The child fell to his knees as the violent hands shook him. Kyle ground his teeth together. His

muscles were stiffening. His eyes were watering. The force of the blow jerked the child's head in his direction. Now all he could see was inky black hair, a hat, and a pair of watery blue eyes.

"Craig," Kyle choked out. His bottom lip trembled and his reddening face scrunched in desperation.

This wasn't the Craig he'd come to know. This wasn't the twisted and mutilated remnants of who Craig used to be. This was who he was. Before he sucked in his last, miserable breath. Before he had those brilliant blues taken from him.

Kyle's brain was too packed full to realize this.

Through the screaming and shaking, Craig was forced onto the ground. At first, the boy fought with vigor. There was hope for escape in every scratch he gave to the arms forcing him down. There was hope someone would hear him when he screamed.

But nobody came.

"No," Kyle could only whisper when he realized Craig's legs were now bare.

Still, Craig fought. He managed a bite, but it resulted only in another painful blow. A curled fist to his small jaw.

There were more sounds. Vile and painful to hear. A zipper. A string of pleading sentences. Kyle could see it. He could see all of it, but he couldn't stop it.

Craig wasn't screaming anymore. His arms were pinned on either side of him by a strong grip. His bare legs were open, head jerked back, mouth gaping like his eyes.

Kyle couldn't see the attacker anymore. He was too disturbed by the way the boy's body jerked. He watched with tears streaming down his cheeks as Craig's face turned beat red. His mouth once gaping with shock was now twisting with silent sobs.

"S-stop," Kyle barely managed to whisper. "You're hurting him!"

He crawled closer, reaching for the boy. Kyle somehow knew there was no way to save him. He couldn't pluck the child away. It was only a memory, but his shaking hand still reached. It prickled with numbness, but he could feel Craig's hair against his fingers.

And that was all he saw of Craig. The touch blew his mind wide open. Suddenly Craig's tragic struggle was just a drop in an ocean of agony. He felt it all as he slipped underneath, as he was dragged deeper and deeper below it. He felt Craig. He felt every child who died like he did, and every child who didn't.

Kyle's body was abandoned, but writhing, on the forest floor. His screaming was muffled by distance. No one should have been able to hear him. No one should have found him, but someone did.

A strong hand gripped his elbow and pulled him up out of the dirt. The very feeling of it lurched his paralyzed mind out of the murky ocean, but his eyes were still faded white with visions. His body was seized up and almost impossible to control. He shook and jerked. His eyes were stuck in static like a broken television.

However, he could still feel those arms around him.

"Tweek?" Kyle hoped aloud, but his vision was still swimming, and his savior didn't reply.

It was someone else.

They lead his tremor wracked body through the woods carefully, but Kyle's mind was too battered to keep up, and his body was in too much pain to keep stepping forward. The presence beside him brought him as far as it could before he slipped into darkness.

The next thing he remembered were voices.

"It's Kyle," one uttered.

"Shit. Is he breathing?" asked another.

"Yeah, yeah, he's breathing. If he's here Tweek can't be too far."

Kyle tried to open his eyes, but so much light poured in that he flinched and slammed them shut again.

"Kyle, can you hear us? Are you okay?"

"I-" he tried to speak, but his voice cracked painfully. He soon realized the blinding light was that of a flashlight and people stood all around him. They were almost as black as the darkness that surrounded them.

"Shh, it's okay," said the one nearest him. A girl, one he recognized. Black lipstick smeared between her lips when she pushed them together. Her free hand ran through Kyle's hair. It was matted and caked with dirt, but she didn't seem to mind.

He could feel her legs under his head, but it was somehow comforting.

"Henrietta," he whispered.

For the first time in all the time he ever knew her, she gave him a smile.

"Yes," she assured him. "What were you doing way out here?"

He squeezed his eyes shut again while he tried to remember, but how could he when he didn't even know where he was.

"I don't remember," he uttered. "Where am I?"

"In the woods," she said quite simply. "We found you like this just off the highway... Who did this to you?"

Who did what to him? He glanced down at himself. His clothes were ripped and dirty. What skin was exposed was bruised and cut up. Only after seeing his battered state does the pain begin to set in. His limbs burn and ache. His eyes were green again, but he could feel they were swollen. No one had done it to him. It must have been a product of his vision induced spasms.

"I... I guess I did," Kyle admitted.

"Okay," she uttered. Obviously she was confused, but not taken aback. "We have someone on their way to come get you, so relax."

Relax? His head was so swollen and numb he didn't have the energy to do anything but relax. He

allowed his head to go limp in her lap, although he could hear the others wandering around them. Leaves and sticks crunched under black soles impatiently.

"Well?" one of the others finally said, though he couldn't tell who. "Aren't we gonna ask him about Tweek!"

"Tweek?" Kyle muttered, his voice suddenly raising a little higher.

"Yeah," Henrietta said. "We were out here looking for him when we found you."

It all came crashing back down again.

"I... Tweek is... I can't find him," he whimpered. He remembered, then. Why he was even out there to begin with. "I was running- I was calling for him, but he- I. There was blood, but I-"

His sniffing turned into rapid, heavy breathing and undecipherable garble.

"Michael, Firkle," Henrietta barked. "Search the woods. Pete, stay here and help me."

Two pairs of footsteps split off from the group. Their flashlights cut through the darkness as they, too, wandered in search of their friend.

"So what are we gonna do?" Pete growled. "Stand here and do nothing while they search alone?"

"No," Henrietta hissed. "You and I are going to get Kyle to the road so his mom will see us."

His mom? Kyle felt his belly rolling all over again. How did they even get her number?

Pete didn't seem so happy about the task given to him, but didn't argue. Henrietta coaxed Kyle up so she could drape his arm over her shoulder. Pete did the same on the opposite side, and then they heaved him up to his unsteady feet. As they walked, Kyle could tell they were along the edge of the highway, though they were still hidden by leaves. When they got out into the clearing he saw a truck parked on the shoulder. Pete let down the tailgate, and he and Henrietta helped him climb into the back. He laid down flat in the bed. His breath was still rapid, his cloths were still dirty and moist, and his chest was still pounding.

Henrietta slid onto the tailgate beside him.

"How... how did you even find me?" he muttered. Sure, he had been near the highway, but no one would have known it just by driving by.

"Firkle thought he saw a body on the side of the road," she explained, unfazed. "When we pulled over nothing was there, but he swore it up and down. So we combed the woods."

"A body?" Kyle murmured. "Did he say what it looked like?"

"No. Just a body."

Kyle rubbed the bridge of his nose. He practically had to pry his own fingers apart and flex them to make his hand work again. In this process, he discovered he'd been clinging tightly to something for dear life. Something he hadn't seen in over a year, and hadn't expected to see again.

A bracelet. A yarn bracelet with interlacing colors of blue and red. Kyle squinted at it for a few moments before reality set in. It was the matching bracelet to the one around his wrist. The one Stan always wore, and, as far as Kyle knew, had been buried with him.

It didn't make any sense.

Everything else seemed to blur together. He remembered his mom's blue SUV pulling up beside their truck, and he remembered her getting out to drag him into it. He felt like he was floating above his body, just numbly watching everyone moving, yet not really absorbing it.

"Now, Kyle, what in God's green earth were you doing tonight?" Sheila demanded. The anger in her voice brought him back to his body.

Her hands were clutched so tightly to her steering wheel that her knuckles were turning white. Kyle just stared at them from the passenger seat. His fingers played with a loose string hanging from the seat cover beneath him.

He wanted to tell her. All that time Kyle and Tweek tried to solve their mystery alone. They never even thought it an option to ask for help.

Now, Tweek was gone.

Kyle let out a small whimper and rubbed at his eyes.

She snapped her head around to glower at him when he still didn't get a reply.

"What's the matter with you lately?" she demanded. "Your grades are slipping, you're falling asleep in class, now I get a call in the middle of the night that some group of kids found you on the side of the road? Bubby, it looks like someone was beating up on you."

Kyle laughed. He didn't know why, and once he started he didn't know how to stop.

"Why the hell is everyone so concerned about me?" he said. "No one should be worried about me right now, they need to be worried about Tweek!"

Sheila shot Kyle an odd look. It was a mixture of the concern she usually wore, but with a touch of confusion and frustration.

"Tweek? Kyle... have you been talking to that boy?"

"Yes! He's my friend, and he's gone! I can't find him, mom, he just..." Kyle felt his bottom lip quiver. "He said he would meet me there, but when I got there, he was gone and-"

Kyle stiffened when his mom stepped on her breaks. Her SUV rocked to a stop on the side of the road, and she jerked it into park. They idled there in the dark. All he could see was what her headlights illuminated and the few cars that passed by them. He sank low in her passenger seat.

"You were in the woods to meet that boy?" she hissed.

"Yeah, I... I go out there to see him a lot."

"You told me you were going to Kenny's house to tutor him."

"I lied."

Sheila shook her head.

"So the Tweek's boy is who did this to you?"

"No! Mom, you aren't listening. All this-", he gestured to his clothes which were torn and muddy.

"I did all this when I was trying to find him. I just wanted to find out where he was but- but I just saw-"

His face twisted and he covered his ears with his hands. "I saw Craig, and - Mom, I need to call the police. I need to help Henrietta look for him. Tweek is out there somewhere and someone's hurting him!"

"Kyle, I need you to listen to me."

She reached into the passenger seat and pried his hands off his head. She squeezed them both tightly and her eyes bored into him.

"I know things have been hard for you since Stan was hit by that train."

Kyle's eyes widened, and his breath stuck down in his throat.

"It only makes sense that you'd seek out somebody like Tweek. Who says he talks to people who are gone, but you have to understand that he's disturbed. He couldn't accept what happened to his friend and now he lives in this fantasy - you don't want to end up that way."

"He didn't make it up!" Kyle snapped. For the first time in a long time he was asking for her help, and she didn't even want to hear him. "Mom, I saw Craig, too. Someone really did kill him and that someone has Tweek now!"

"Kyle! Don't you know that boy runs away from home all the time?" she argued, obviously tired of his tales. "Ever since you were in sixth grade the cops were at his house every other week to look for him. They told his parents if he did it one more time they were going to send him to juvenile hall, so they gave up calling. He comes and goes as he pleases."

"But!-"

"He'll show up in a couple days," she said as if it was a threat. "But you won't be seeing him again."

"Mom! You aren't listening!" Kyle actually screamed. He reached down to try and unbuckle the seat belt restraining him, but she subdued his hands.

"You need help, Kyle," Sheila said, though it was much gentler than any of her words had been that night. "You and Tweek both do, but I can't control what happens to him. You, though, you have to see someone."

His open mouth closed, and he stopped struggling. It was obvious she wasn't going to listen to him. Even if he did try to tell her the whole story; she already had her mind made up. Kyle was crazy. Explaining his gift, or Craig, or what happened that night, would only add fuel to the fire.

Her SUV pulled back onto the road and Kyle kept up his silence.

He was going to find Tweek, even if no one in that god forsaken town was going to help him.

The Bile

Kyle was banished to his bed after that terrible night. His mother insisted that he needed rest to heal from... whatever was all over his body. He wasn't even allowed to go to school the next day, though he wasn't surprised.

His father stayed home to creep into his room every hour on the hour. Sometimes he would bring snacks, others he'd bring ice packs, and others he'd just stand awkwardly in the doorway and say he was there to talk if he wanted to.

Kyle knew why.

Though he already swore up and down no one put their hands on him, his dad didn't believe it any more than his mother did. His wrists were chaffed and bruised as if he'd been bound with rope. His ribs, stomach, and back were littered with scratches and dark splotches of color. What was worse was his neck.

Heavy bruises wrapped around his throat like angry hands, and Kyle couldn't help but wonder if it was because of his forced vision. The similarities between his skin and Craig's were too many to ignore.

Rather than worrying about his skin, he was skimming a book he'd laid across his legs. It was a well-used composition book. The one Tweek entrusted to him. He wasn't skimming through the pages to learn, though. He just wanted to see the words Tweek used. His hands seemed to be reading better than his eyes. Sometimes, when he would turn a page, he would hear the words Tweek uttered while writing them.

His head jerked towards his door when he heard a faint knock on the other side. Without giving him a chance to answer, it creaked open anxiously. Another person stepped in, though it wasn't his father. The first thing Kyle noticed was long, unkempt blond hair. His heart soared with the idea of Tweek, but it came crashing back down when he noticed a familiar orange parka where a black coat should have been.

He slammed his book closed and shoved it under him.

"Kenny?" Kyle muttered as he rubbed his eyes. He shifted in bed so that he could better face his visitor.

Kenny rubbed the back of his neck and nodded. He glanced around the room, and then took ginger steps towards Kyle's bedside.

"I'm not alone," Kenny uttered as he gestured to the door. Another head poked in, also blond, though partially shaved.

"Butters," Kyle exclaimed with a smile.

"Y-yeah!" Butters replied as he stepped inside.

Kyle's smile immediately evaporated when he realized Cartman was also dragged along. The tub of lard hang back in the now wide open door way. His chubby arms were crossed and a displeased expression was plastered onto his face. Kyle couldn't fathom why at first. So much had happened since their screaming match he'd forgotten all about it.

When Kyle gingerly raised himself in bed to greet the others, Eric's scowl faltered.

"Gosh, Kyle. Well, sorry for sayin', but you look awful," Butters nearly whispered. He stood awkwardly beside Kenny, twiddling his fingers as if he didn't know what else to say.

"Oh," Kyle uttered as he ran his hand over his bruised neck. "Yeah. Don't worry, though. I'm okay."

None of them looked convinced. Especially not Kenny. A knot settled into Kyle's guts when he remembered Cartman wasn't the only one he was on bad terms with. That didn't seem to matter to Kenny, though, who still stepped forward to take a seat on the edge of Kyle's bed.

Kyle pushed his book a little deeper under his covers.

Butters and Eric looked at one another for a moment before Butters leaned in to whisper into the other's ear. Eric rolled his eyes at whatever Butters said to him, but still followed him out before securely closing the door behind them.

Kyle's brows furrowed, and then he threw his gaze at Kenny for an explanation. He offered a shrug.

"I guess they figured we would want to talk alone," Kenny said as his short fingers combed through his hair.

Kyle didn't mind being alone with Ken. In fact, after the previous night, their little fallout seemed like such a small thing. At the same time, though, Kyle knew it wasn't.

"I'm sorry," Kyle finally said. "For yelling at you."

It was a long time coming, but Kenny just shrugged his shoulders. There was more Kyle needed to apologize for. He looped his finger into the yarn bracelet around his wrist and gave it a tug for assurance.

"I'm also sorry that I made the last year so much harder on you," Kyle said. It was funny how those words seemed so hard to say just a couple weeks earlier. "I'm sorry I never once asked if you were okay, or offered to be there for you like you were for me. You gave everything to help me and I never even said thank you. I took you for granted."

The thin line of Kenny's mouth fell into a frown, but he still didn't speak. He only sat there, quiet, yet listening. It reminded Kyle of how Craig would stare blankly when Tweek would speak to him.

He swallowed a wad of spit, and decided to continue.

"I have a lot of things I'm sorry for. I have a lot of people I took for granted. A lot of people who still love me and try and look out for me- even when all I do is fuck things up," Kyle rubbed his arms, shivering like ice had been poured into his lap. "I can't tell them that, though. So I just... I needed you to know."

Kyle lowered his head, having said everything he needed to say. He gnawed on his lower lip and waited patiently for Kenny's reply. Whether he accepted the apology or not, Kyle felt just a little bit better for having said what he felt.

"I do know," Kenny replied. "I was never mad, you know."

"You weren't?" Kyle pondered.

"No. I was a little hurt at first, but I got over it before the end of the day. Didn't you read any of my texts?"

Kyle's face flushed a little, and then he looked down at his folded hands before shaking his head no. "I guess I was afraid of what you'd have to say."

Kenny's eyes swept over him, over his lost expression and his damaged skin, then he scooted a little closer. He dropped his hand over top of Kyle's and squeezed softly. Instantly, Kyle could hear voices through the contact. It was Butter's voice, asking Kenny if he knew where Kyle was.

He felt fear in Kenny's body. The same kind of fear Kyle himself felt for Tweek.

"That's okay. It's all said and done, now. Water under the bridge," Kenny squeezed a little harder. Butter's voice got a little louder. "This isn't just about me, though, is it?"

His last sentence was tacked on and clumsy, but genuine and concerned. Surprised by the question, Kyle looked away as his face already crunched with sorrow.

"Kyle... if its okay, can you tell me what happened last night?"

Kyle pulled his hand out of Kenny's grasp to rub his raw wrist. The contact was abrasive and painful, but Kyle couldn't stop. A part of him was screaming that he shouldn't tell. His parents didn't believe it. His friends wouldn't either. Kenny was the only person left in the whole world who knew Kyle saw spirits- this could be the only person in the world that would help.

"Tweek," he muttered. "I was going to see Tweek. We would meet in this abandoned house in the woods, but he wasn't there. There was just... blood on the floor and he-" Kyle's brain felt numb, and his words were robotic and distant. Still, it was so hard to talk about.

"It's okay," Kenny reassured him. "You can tell me. You can tell me anything."

That was all it took. Kyle was reduced to a shaking mess. Starting from their first wild night chasing down Shadowman, Kyle told it all. He told Kenny about the first time Tweek walked him home, about his first time seeing Craig again, and about all the terrible, disgusting things he'd seen through his hands. He told him how hard it was to dig a hole deep enough for Craig, he explained how one's heart falters when it watches a child die, and he cried when he described the look in Tweek's eyes when he asked Kyle to leave. When he told him he couldn't bear to see Kyle hurt. He talked about everything that lead up to the previous night.

Kenny leaned in attentively. Never once did he interrupt or second guess Kyle's experiences. He only nodded his head. He only listened, though he'd bite his lip when Kyle said something particularly gruesome.

"And now," Kyle concluded after his retelling of the goths scraping him off of the forest floor. "Now whoever did all those awful things, who killed Craig, he has Tweek!"

By then Kyle's legs were thrown over the edge of his bed. His head was leaning on Kenny's shoulder. It was contact they wouldn't normally have, but Kyle needed it.

"He has Tweek and it's all my fucking fault, just like - just like..."

Kyle slammed his eyes closed and let out a loud growl of frustration.

"Just like what?" Kenny asked. The poor guy's head was swimming with everything Kyle was telling him. He was so overwhelmed with a combination of numbness and urgency he couldn't

think of what else he could say.

"Just like... like Stan."

Kyle practically melted against Kenny's side. His teeth were grinding together so hard it hurt, but nothing else would have quenched his anger and fear.

"Stan?" Kenny repeated, befuddled.

"I don't understand why he saved me last night," Kyle admitted. "When Henrietta told me about the body on the road and I saw his bracelet in my fist- I knew it was him who led them to me. And looking back on it, when I first found Craig in the woods. I screamed Stan's name, and something tried to protect me from him. I... I want to be happy, because knowing that he's there is all I ever wanted, but now... I just feel guilty. Why should he sacrifice his time protecting me when it's my fault he's gone?"

Kenny's eyes softened at his friend's distress. He threw an arm around Kyle's shoulder and squeezed.

"Ky, Stan loved you. You were his best friend. We always catch ourselves second guessing the things we said and did, but it's no one's fault but Stan's. I'm sure he knows that and-"

"Yes, yes it is someone else's fault, Ken! It's mine!" Kyle cried out.

There was another long, uncomfortable silence as Kyle shifted beneath Kenny's arm.

"This isn't like Tweek and Craig," Kyle continued, quieter that time. "Tweek always blamed himself for Craig's death, but it really wasn't his fault. He had no way of knowing what would happen when Craig left that night, but I did. I knew with Stan."

"Ky... You talked to him before he died?" Kenny asked with his brows pinching.

"He was drunk!" Kyle whined, his fists slamming against his raw knees. "He was drunk like he always was. We were on the phone, and he just kept telling me the same thing he always did, begging me not to leave, promising he'll get help- he did it every time, Kenny. I was just so tired. I yelled at him. I yelled and I told him I didn't want to see him again!"

As always, Kenny remained silent in the most comforting way.

"He... he was on his way to my house. He said he was coming, and I knew he was drunk, but I wouldn't reply. He was driving because he wanted to talk to me," Kyle confessed as he buried his face in his hands. "That's why I wanted to see him again so badly. I thought that as long as he didn't come back, it was because he hated me."

"Kyle, why didn't you tell me?" Kenny asked, hushed.

"I didn't tell anyone because I... I was afraid of what they'd say. His mom- his sister- you. How could I look you all in the eyes and tell you I could have saved him, but chose not to?" Kyle asked. "And now, now Tweek's going to die, too."

He was crying again. Hopelessness washed over him like ice water, and his aching body stiffened. Even if he knew who was to blame for Tweek's disappearance, he still didn't know where he was. Despite everything he learned in their time investigating and planning, he still knew nothing.

"Tweek isn't going to die," Kenny promised. "We'll find him."

...

There was a misty feeling in the air down there. The only sound that filled the empty space was the squeaking on a hanging light that had long since been busted. Darkness. There was so much darkness. Tweek licked his drying lips and let out a small, pathetic sound. Was he alone? He didn't think so, he heard whispers. Quiet murmuring that never had an end. A painful medley of tragic last words and desperate pleas. They echoed inside of his mind and left him writing.

This was an evil place. A deadly place. He felt it since the moment he was forced down there.

"Are you hungry again?" he heard someone whisper under the darkness. The very moment that voice violated the air of the room, all the others hushed in collective fear.

Tweek's instinct was to answer, but he somehow had the courage to hold his tongue. If the spirits were afraid; he was, too.

"If you don't start talking soon, I'm going to have to let you starve," It was a terrible threat, but the tone it carried was light and airy. Almost kind, which was the worst part.

A light flicked on, illuminating the dingy room in a hideous yellow glow that stung Tweek's eyes. A figure stood in the far corner; the handle of a flood light wrapped in its fist.

This was the first time Tweek could see what was around him. There was a bed that's mattress should have long been tossed away. He was bound to its iron frame. The sad thing was rotting with rust, and the once white mattress was grimy and stained with... Tweek didn't want to know.

The floor beneath him was just as soiled. Dark liquid oozed into brick and stone, whispering the disgusting tragedy of whomever it belonged to. Tweek found himself thankful he didn't have Kyle's hands.

Starvation suddenly seemed like a sweet release.

"It's quite funny isn't it?" the figure asked. Tweek could see his face, hear his voice. He knew this person, but his head refused it. It was impossible. This man. This man, was the one who brutalized and beat Craig? This was the man who raped and murdered him?

"What's funny?" Tweek croaked. He tried to move, but metal clamped tightly around his wrists. The bed. He was cuffed to the bed, which was bolted into the cement floor.

He was fucked.

"Well, that it was you all this time. Running around my pond at night, digging up all your holes. I should have figured with all your talltales of Craig."

Tweek yanked against his restraints, but all that did was let out a metallic clank that echoed around the cavernous space. That's when he noticed the tiny person sitting at the top of the wooden staircase. He was curled in a ball, so terrified he was trembling down to his bones. Craig. He followed them, but he was too afraid to step foot down there.

Tweek's brain was suddenly buzzing, catching up with what was happening around him. Could this really be?

"Shadowman," the person muttered again before breathing out a bout of laughter. "Poor kid, were you out here all this time trying to find him?"

Tweek ground his teeth together, but finally rose his head to address the man across the room. With a tight jaw and a sneer, he slowly nodded his head.

The man's laughter was unquenchable now. "How tragic. All that time you were searching, well, you've finally found him."

"What are you talking about?" Tweek hissed through his dry teeth.

"He wasn't like the others," the man said. "I couldn't... I couldn't cut him. I couldn't let the fish pick away at him, you know... so I put him in a box."

The man's smile widened.

"Right beneath you."

Tweek looked down. The bed may have been sitting on cement, but under Tweek's aching body was a layer of dirty brick haphazardly sank into the dirt. Tweek's breathing went rapid and ravenous. He jerked against the cuffs and felt them cut and sink into the flesh of his wrists.

"Why?" Tweek screeched, his piercing cry whining in Craig's head.

"I didn't mean to," comes the cruel reply. "I wanted to keep him."

The man's unsettling, kind eyes floated beneath Tweek. Beneath the makeshift floor of brick and mud. Into the supposed box Craig was inside of.

"But... he couldn't handle it. I was too careless, too rough. Blood just poured out of him and I didn't know what to do," those eyes trained back onto Tweek, and he felt his blood run cold. "It was like stepping on a kitten. I loved it too much to snap it's neck, but the vet wasn't an option... I really didn't mean to, you have to believe me."

"You... hurt him so bad he was bleeding to death, and you couldn't kill him... so you buried him alive..." Tweek repeated breathlessly.

But Craig had been drown. It was one of the only things Craig showed him over all those years. Was this man lying to toy with him, or had Craig ever really showed Tweek his death at all?

"Yes," said the man, though it was an oddly ordinary way of saying it. "Forget my little thing for now, though. It's your turn. I have questions, too... like, for instance, who has been helping the Shadowman."

"What?" Tweek sputtered. Asking such small, stupid questions was all he had the power to do. His body hurt. His head was swimming. This must be a nightmare. One worse than all the others.

"Who did you bring here!?" the man demanded. His calm demeanor twisted with bitterness and anger. Tweek had never seen him flip so dramatically.

"No one," Tweek growled in protest.

Again, the man spouted a laugh. "Okay, we'll play it your way."

He shifted across the room, to the bed Tweek was chained to. The man's big hands wrapped around papers that had been sitting on the bed. The paper cried and crumbled in his angry fist. "Maybe, then, you can tell me who's handwriting this is."

Paper after paper fell into Tweek's face as the angry man tossed them at him. "This is very neat,

bubbly writing. Maybe it belongs to a girl?"

Tweek recognized them. They were all of the notes that were tacked onto the wall upstairs.

It was Kyle's obnoxiously neat handwriting, which is exactly what that terrible man wanted to know.

"Who's is it, boy?"

"Fuck you," Tweek spat.

"This is no time for games, you know. Whoever this person is," the man snarled as he shoved one of the papers painfully hard into Tweek's face. "You've told them everything."

Tweek let out a scream when the paper's sharp, crumpled edges scratched at gouges on his face. He jerked away, and then bit down hard on the finger closest to his mouth.

"Ah!" The man screamed before tumbling away. Kyle's paper fell onto the floor as the man nursed at his bleeding finger.

"You little-," he snarled, but his face soon turned from infuriated to calm. Another flip, like some deranged coin toss. He took a deep breath, and then smiled again.

"I don't want to hurt you, you know that, right? all of this has been for you, the last thing I'd want is to ruin it by busting up that pretty face of yours."

Tweek grimaced.

"All you have to do is tell me their name. Then we can all disappear, and no one will ever get hurt again. That's what you want, right?"

"No," Tweek hissed.

"Welp, I guess you'll have to be punished then."

Craig's mouth gaped open and a terrible scream rumbled from his throat as the tall figure moved to a table across the room. From it the man pulled out a metal pipe. Without a moment's hesitation he whirled around and slammed the jagged end against Tweek's ribs. The boy sucked in a sharp breath, and then a scream. It came back down onto his stomach. He twisted and writhed, his spine arching at the pain.

"One way or another," came a growl. "You will give me that name."

There was another blow. It was one so harsh Tweek felt vomit squirt into the back of his throat. There was another and another. Each intense, searing pain causing his throat to burn with stomach acid and his body to convulse and jerk.

A hard boot finished the job when it slammed its heel into his gut. He slid onto his side. What little food left in his stomach bubbled out of his mouth and spilled onto the stone floor. He slammed his eyes closed to hide his tears, and gasped in the smell of his own bile.

"Now you are hungry," said the man. "Eat."

The Real Name

It took a lot of begging for Kyle's parents to even let him get out of bed, let alone go back to school, the next day.

"But your bruises," his mother argued.

"But my math test," he countered.

Seems he damaged their trust in him, because neither of his parents believed his intentions. In fact, his mother mentioned several times how she should call the police to get to the bottom of Kyle's wounded state. God forbid Kyle leave the house where someone else would notice the bruises and make that call for her.

Kenny had to come over before school that morning to help plead Kyle's case. He talked with them alone for quite some time. Kyle could hear them through the vent under his bed.

"Me and the guys are with him all day, we'll keep an eye on him," Kenny argued. "Besides, If I spend time with him he might tell me what happened."

It was a bogus excuse. Kyle already told Kenny everything, but it worked. Just a half hour before they bus arrived his mother wrapped a scarf around his neck to hide the angry hand prints there. She begged him to be safe; to call her if he needed to come home.

Then, he boarded the bus with Kenny.

He and his small group continued that day by skipping their first class. Rather than part ways outside the cafeteria after breakfast, they clustered together and walked to the computer lab. Yearbook Club was held there in the morning. Unfortunately for its members, Kyle and company crashed their meeting to harass them with an odd request.

"Tweek Tweak," Butters explained meekly to Wendy Testaburger, the club's president. "We need a picture of him. A recent one."

"Why?" she pondered with a lopsided frown.

"He's missing," Kyle answered, flustered. "We need a picture for a flier - we can't think of anyone else who would have pictures of him."

"Missing?" she asked. "Shouldn't his parents be the ones doing this? Or the police?"

"The way I see it," Kenny replied, "His parents would have done it already if they were concerned, and our police force doesn't have the best track record when it comes to finding missing boys. It's the only chance we have of finding him right now."

And he was right. Kyle knew in his heart who had Tweek prisoner right then, but he had no proof, and going directly to Thomas was only going to put Tweek in even more danger. Kenny was right, and Kyle felt more powerless than ever.

Wendy gave into their request. Not only that, but she was kind enough to offer her photoshop services and made the posters herself.

Kyle stood wordless beside her computer, fixated on a nearby a row of printers. He watched each

bright yellow flier spit out of the bottom. The words 'MISSING' assaulted the top of each paper in blocky, black lettering. Underneath the ugly word was a phone number, and beneath that was the only picture of Tweek Kyle had ever seen. His yearbook photo from the year before. He looked just as tired and messy on those missing posters as he did in person.

Wendy printed two hundred of them, fifty for each person in Kyle's entourage. Kyle divided the stack amongst them, and they each picked a different part of town to plaster Tweek's face on after school. Eric snatched his stack with a groan, but, thankfully, refrained from muttering anything hurtful. Butters was the next to receive his stack. He tucked it in his binder and held it to his chest. Before Butters left the room behind Cartman, he squeezed Kyle's shoulder reassuringly.

Kyle wasn't sure what Kenny told them, but they were helping. That's all that mattered.

Kyle didn't even try to pay attention the rest of the day. Between worrying about his missing friend and trying to hide his bruises, he didn't have much time to learn about calculus or biology.

Butters already noticed dark brown smudges on Kyle's sleeve during second period. It happened to be blood that seeped out of his raw wrists and onto his clothes. No amount of bathroom hand soap could remove it. His neck, thankfully, wasn't as tattered as his arms where, but one of his teachers managed a glance as he readjusted his scarf. Even the spirits around him didn't linger as bad as her eyes did.

Things only got worse when he realized Eric was more willing to help than he seemed.

Kyle went to his math class a period after Cartman did, and when he took his seat he noticed the neon yellow poster tacked to the cork board. The picture of Tweek's face started a buzz before class even began.

"Who's Tweek?" was what most of them asked.

"I'm not sure," was the nicest reply Kyle heard.

A fear bubbled up in Kyle's stomach when he realized his peers weren't concerned about the paper's warning. They'd rather murmur about how weird the boy on it always was, about how he probably just ran away again and it was better off for everyone if he didn't come back.

Kyle finally understood the pain Tweek carried with him all those years. Fear, anger, and, most of all, loneliness.

His classmates may not have cared, but Kyle did. There was so much he never said. There were so many memories they never got to share. In spite of how terrible everything had been since they met, Kyle was looking forward to giving Tweek better things to remember. He wanted the chance to really know the boy who hid under that black jacket. With each hour that ticked by, it seemed more and more like wishful thinking.

He was so afraid.

Realizing this, an odd memory occurred to him. Tweek's voice bounced around in his mind before the muffled thought became clearer.

"If you're going to start hanging around with me, you better get used to being scared."

...

He and his group gathered around their usual table during lunch. The silence among them was

deafening, but Kyle didn't notice. He was too preoccupied with mutilating his meatloaf to exchange pleasantries. His friends picked at their lunches, they exchanged lingering glances, but conversation was dead.

"I hung one of Tweek's posters in the library," Butters said, splitting the tension, as he wrung his hands together. "Have you got anything yet, Kyle?"

"No," he replied. The number on the posters was to an app Kyle downloaded on his phone. He hated to admit it, but it was a good thing he didn't have any messages yet with the way the kids in his math class talked. "I think putting them in school is a good idea just in case, but I don't think we'll have a chance at reaching anyone until we start leaving them around town for more adults to see."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Butters replied. "Well, maybe we can hang one more here in the lunch room. That way all the grades would see it. All the teachers, too."

"Yeah. I guess so," Kyle muttered, dejected. "I'll hang one on the cork board by the bathrooms."

When he stood from his seat, Kenny did as well. In a lot of ways it was comforting to have his friend's ever attentive presence. In others, it felt suffocating. Kyle's body shook and trembled when he was touched without consent. His ears rang and burned when he heard voices he didn't expect. Being around people was hard, because he suddenly found himself untrusting and suspicious of all of them.

If Craig's own father could do such terrible things to his son- to other people's sons- what was stopping anyone else from hurting Kyle?

'Kenny is here to help you,' Kyle had to remind himself. 'Not to hurt you.'

Still, he couldn't shake the fear.

"Sorry," Kyle spoke up. "Is it okay if I go on my own?"

Kenny stared for a short moment before nodding his head. They parted ways, but Kyle knew Kenny was still there if he needed him.

Once he approached the bathrooms Kyle reached into his binder and extracted one of the yellow posters. With a couple stray thumb tacks, he carefully pinned the paper on display for the whole school to see. He stepped back for a moment to admire his work, and then let out a whimper when he realized he ended up admiring Tweek's face instead.

"Where are you?" He whispered as if the paper could answer.

"What the hell," he heard a groan from beside him. "You've been the one hanging all these posters?"

It caused him to flinch and jerk away, though he wasn't sure why. His head snapped towards the person who spoke. A Burnett boy stood there. His chunky frame sported a red and white letterman jacket, though he didn't belong to the football team. The boy's brown eyes pried themselves away from the missing poster to stare at Kyle.

Clyde Donovan.

"Huh?," Kyle muttered, "Oh, yeah."

"What for?" Clyde replied just as awkwardly. His eyes slid back to Tweek's flier to avoid the aggravated look his question caused.

"What the hell do you mean what for? It's a missing poster, so its purpose should be pretty obvious," Kyle seethed.

"Well, no. I mean. I saw you've been hanging around him at lunch for a couple weeks. You gotta know by now that Tweek runs away like... all the time."

"He didn't run away," Kyle spat. His face was getting red in anger, so he glared at his feet to spare Clyde from it. "He's in trouble. If you don't know anything that can help you're only wasting my time."

Clyde sighed.

"You're already wasting your time. You haven't been around him long enough to know how he is, I guess," Clyde nearly whispered. His eyes were still trained ahead of him, skimming over what little information the paper had to tell him.

"Yeah, because you know so much about him, right?" Kyle growled. Every ounce of patience had been squeezed out of his aching body. If he was going to take his pain out on anyone, Clyde was a perfect target. "Because you were such a great friend to him."

"I was, or at least I tried to be!" Clyde's rant continued, "You don't know how hard it was after we lost Craig. You don't know how losing somebody like that can change things! How was I supposed to be there for him when he went crazy and made up all that shit about-"

"Don't fucking talk to me like I don't know how losing someone feels!"

"Kyle, it's okay, you don't have to explain yourself to him."

It was Kenny's voice. He, Butters, and Eric all stood behind Kyle. He wasn't sure how long they'd been there. His head was buzzing. His eyes were watering. His friends wanted him to back down, but not this time.

"Yes! Yes I do! I'm so sick of this- this ridiculous bullshit! If you don't fucking remember, my best friend just died last year!" Kyle spat. "Stan fucking died, you think that didn't change us? You think that didn't make me go crazy? For the first three months I was a basket-case. I'm still not fucking right, but my friends didn't abandon me. Tweek's did. You did because strangers liking you meant more than taking care of the people who already loved you."

"What, did Tweek tell you that?" Clyde demanded with his watery eyes narrowed and his teeth grinding.

"Tweek is gone, Clyde! No one will fucking listen to me, but he's gone. Gone like Craig was. Maybe if you didn't dump him like trash he'd still be here! Maybe if anyone in this fucking town gave two damns about what he was going through he'd be safe right now!"

By then, Kyle was screaming. Clyde wasn't even arguing anymore. He was just standing there with his eyes wide, like a child who's mother had been scolding him. Kenny and Eric took Kyle, who was still screaming, carefully by the shoulders to lead him away. He was resistant and stumbled as they coaxed him into the bathroom. Strings of angry obscenities echoed out into the hall until Kenny closed the door behind them. Butters was left behind to stand awkwardly before Clyde. The muffled shrieks seeping out of the bathroom beside them didn't help matters much.

"Um... you'll have to forgive Kyle right now," Butters offered on his friend's behalf. "Well, seems things have been pretty tough for him. On account'a the other night and all."

"The other night?" Clyde questioned.

"Yeah. The goth kids found him laying on the side of the road. Well... like he was just yelling at you, he thinks someone took his friend. He told Kenny that's why he was out there all night. Looking for Tweek, you know. We aren't too sure what the whole story is, but the goths have been out looking for him, too."

"They have?" Clyde asked. "W-wait. How long has he been gone for?"

"Kyle says he went missing last night, but he hasn't shown up for school in almost a week. They all seem to think it's real serious so, well, so do I."

...

Kyle stopped yelling, eventually. It took a lot of pats on the back from Kenny and a lot more 'suck it up's from Cartman, but his rage settled in his stomach and fell silent again. He was leaning over the sink and staring at his reflection when he started feeling like he was floating.

What an odd sensation. Like nothing he ever felt before. His heart slammed hard against his ribs and his breath was rapid. At the same time, though, he felt his numb mind float from the ground. It was as if he was stuck to the ceiling. He watched himself at the sink. His friends moved around him, speaking words he didn't understand.

He didn't hear them anymore. It didn't matter what they were trying to say.

The door opened, then. "Dude, get the hell out of here. You caused enough damage already, dumbass," Eric, surprisingly, spat in Kyle's defense.

Kyle's attention swayed from the mirror to the front of the bathroom. A small group had congregated there. Eric and Kenny stood side by side like a wall between Kyle and the intruders.

Clyde had returned, but he wasn't alone. He and Token stood together in the doorway.

"Chill out," Token interrupted as if Clyde couldn't speak for himself. "He's just here to talk to Kyle."

"Fine, then," Kenny said. "Talk."

Kyle pushed off from the sink and stood, swaying, in the middle of the room. Clyde's eyes locked with his.

"Alone," Token specified.

"Why?" Eric demanded.

"It's personal."

"And important," Clyde added sheepishly.

"Anything he's got to say he can say in front of us," someone said. Kyle thought it was Kenny, but by then their bickering was all bleeding together.

"Guys," Kyle spoke up with an annoyed wave of his hand. "It's fine. I don't have a problem with

talking to them alone."

Eric and Kenny exchanged glances. They weren't sure Kyle could handle confrontation of any kind right now. After a tense moment, Kenny exhaled.

"We'll see you after school, right?" Kenny asked.

"Yeah, of course."

"Okay, we'll see you then," Kenny replied. "Um... be safe."

He turned, and then pushed past Clyde and Token. With a sneer, Eric did the same.

With Kyle's friends gone, the air only got thicker. Clyde's feet were anchored into the linoleum. He didn't step forward, didn't speak. Not for a long while.

"Um..." he uttered with his eyes trained onto his feet.

Token gave him a little shove forward, causing Clyde to stumble and approach Kyle.

"What do you want?" Kyle finally asked with his green eyes narrowing.

The other boy reached into the pocket of his red jacket. He fumbled for a moment, but pulled out a yellow piece of folded paper. Tweek's missing poster was Kyle's first thought, but he was proven wrong when Clyde sloppily unfolded the paper.

It wasn't fresh and new as if printed this morning. It was old and worn, split into two pieces over time. Still, Clyde had them both, and he held them out for Kyle to take. Unsure, he took the paper from Clyde. Where Tweek's picture should have been was replaced with another familiar face. Craig's. This was one of Craig's missing posters.

An odd energy settled into the fibers of the flyer. Kyle could feel them in his fingers. Sadness. Fear. Regret. And, somehow, reassurance. Kyle's hands were so much more observant than they had been before.

So much stronger.

"Why are you giving me this?" he muttered with his eyebrows scrunched.

"Because, well... I tried to call."

"What?" Kyle looked back down at the paper as if it would explain what Clyde was trying to say.

"When I first saw that poster, I tried to call the number," Clyde clarified. "The missing persons one. I... I couldn't, though, so I kept the paper in case I felt brave one day."

Kyle blinked at the little boy in the worn photo. "Clyde, you know something you aren't telling anybody?... About Craig?"

Clyde looked back at Token, like a child in need of direction. Token closed his eyes and nodded firmly.

"Tell him, Clyde," Token said. "The same thing you told me this morning."

Clyde squeezed his hands into fists and stood up straight- like that would give him the bravery he needed to admit whatever secret he'd been hoarding.

"Craig was my best friend," he admitted. "The best friend I ever had. We never kept secrets from each other. Not ever."

The yellow paper was held loosely in Kyle's hand. He stood ridged, his heart catching up to his head.

"He came over one night. It was about a week before he went away. We were laying on my bedroom floor, and he said to me- he said: 'I have something I'm afraid to tell anyone'. Of course, I told him I was there. So he told me... I'm... uh, I never talked about this until today."

"Clyde, don't stop. Tell me what Craig said to you," Kyle demanded.

Clyde wiped at his eyes as if he was about to cry, but held it in to mutter, "Someone was hurting him. He said it had been happening for a while, but he didn't want anyone to know. If Craig told anyone Tweek would get hurt, too. He was so scared... When Craig vanished, I knew he who took him. I wanted to tell someone, but I was only eleven! I didn't know how-"

"Was it his dad? Was it Thomas?" Kyle interrupted, his hands beginning to shake.

"What?" He muttered while making a face. "No, no. Thomas loved Craig. Fuck, if he knew what was happening he would have fucking tore that man apart-"

"What man Clyde? Who is the man?"

Clyde blinked, and then rubbed his face with his sleeve once more.

"Richard," Clyde said.

Kyle just stood there. He just stood there and stared as Clyde lifted his head to look into his eyes.

"Richard?" Kyle uttered. The name was so familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Tweek's dad," Clyde explained solemnly. "That's why Craig never wanted anyone to ever know. He was molesting Craig, and Craig just- he just took it, 'case he thought as long as Richard was hurting him he'd leave Tweek alone."

"But then Craig stopped showing up for school. In a fucked up way, I blamed it on Tweek."

Kyle still didn't speak. He just stared with his lips lack and his eyes watery. It didn't make sense. Wasn't Thomas the man who caught Craig with that dreaded photo album? The door in his vision was unfamiliar. It easily could have been either of their parent's closets.

"Are you for sure he's really gone?" Clyde asked. His body was quivering, then. "You don't really think someone took him, right?"

Kyle didn't answer.

Be Silent, Not Still

The weather outside finally gave into it's cool, harsh ways. Snow fell in thick puffs out the shop window, and Kyle was wrapped snugly in a big orange parka when he stepped inside. Kenny and the others were spread out plastering Tweek's face about town. Because of this, Kyle was alone.

He rubbed the cold off of his bare hands as he took a look around. Mrs. Tweak was the first person to catch his eye. She stood not even five feet away while she scratched at the linoleum with a broom. Her white fingers clutched the handle tightly, and she mumbled incoherent babble to herself. Kyle deposited his hands inside his big pockets. There, they could safely revel in comforting visions of Kenny.

"Um, hello," he greeted.

She jerked her head up, and then forced a smile. "

Hello," she muttered in return. "The Broflovski boy... two coffees with two creams each. Yes, I remember."

"That's me," he said, deciding not to point out that's the same thing she said last time they met.

His eyes wandered towards the start of his next mission; the front counter. He planned to step towards it, towards the man standing dutifully behind it, but he didn't have the courage. Not yet.

"Looks like winter's finally hit us," she uttered while twisting the broom handle in her fists. Kyle jumped and tore his eyes away from the small line of customers at the back of the shop.

Looking at her worn expression and disheveled state, he caught himself wondering how much she knows. How much she'd seen. Surely she'd have some gruesome stories to tell, being the wife of a serial killer and all.

Did she know about Craig, just as Clyde had?

Did she know about Tweek?

Fighting the urge to reach out and touch her was difficult. Kyle's fingers curled into fists in his pockets. Not yet, he reminded himself. Not yet.

"Yeah, I can't believe how much snow's already coming down," he replied.

Deep inside, he was terrified of what the bitter chill would mean for Tweek. He only hoped his friend was somewhere the snow couldn't get to him.

"Yes," Mrs. Tweak said, and then she continued her sweeping.

Only then did he realize her hands shook around the handle. He felt the urge to comfort her, for some reason. There was something more important that demanded his attention.

He straightened the front of Kenny's parka, stuffed his hands back into it's pockets, and then got in line for a coffee. Three people were in line ahead of him. By the time he got to the counter, though, he was the last in the store.

"Hello. Welcome to Tweak's Coffee," said a voice. A voice that made his ears ring and his body grow weak. "How may I help you today?"

He tried to lift his head to look the barista in the face, but his eyes were watering. He rubbed his tongue over his lips to wet them, and then uttered softly: "A large, uh... v-vanilla cream with one... wait, I mean two creamers."

His face would have gone red from his stuttering; that is, if it hadn't already been paper white.

"Of course, coming right up," said the man.

He turned away from Kyle to make his drink, and when he did the boy finally raised his head to look at him.

Normal. He seemed so normal. He was balding, like many middle aged men. He wore a casual green button up shirt and a pair of slacks. Both of which were protected by an apron. It said "Tweek's Coffee" across the front. Kyle couldn't see it from behind, but it was the same apron Tweek wore last time Kyle was served there.

When the man spun around with coffee in hand, Kyle flinched. He didn't want to talk to Richard. He didn't want to even see him, but once Kyle got a glimpse he couldn't stop staring. A thick white patch covered the right side of his face. His eye, more specifically. A small, red stain formed in the center of the gauze. Torn skin peeked out from the adhesive edges like thick, bloody veins.

"You alright there, son?" the man asked. "Looks like you've seen a ghost."

He sat the cup on the counter before Kyle. The boy didn't reach for it.

"Oh, sorry. It's just," Kyle made a gesture to the side of his own face. "What happened?"

Richard reached up and touched the gauze with his fingertips, as if he'd forgotten it was there.

"Ah, yes, this," Richard uttered, swaying side to side. "See, I tried to pick up carpentry again after a long while. I guess power tools and I don't get along."

Kyle narrowed his eyes slightly at the excuse. From what bit he could see of Richard's wounds, it looked like he got in a tussle with a honey badger. Like something, or someone, tore at his face with talons.

Chit chat wasn't going to answer any of Kyle's questions.

"Maybe it's time for a new hobby." Richard laughed. It was an honest, casual laugh. Just how normal it sounded was what made Kyle's skin crawl. If Clyde hadn't confessed, Kyle would never have guessed Richard was capable of any wrong doing.

He jammed his hand in his jean pocket and fished for the five dollar bill he'd stashed there. He was ready to get what he came for.

He held the money tightly in his fist when he offered it to the man over the counter. Without a second thought, Richard reached for the money.

He touched Kyle's hand.

"You know how very much I love you, don't you?" a low, gruff voice whispered in Kyle's ear. "You know that I'm only hurting you like this because you're making me."

Richard sputtered in confusion when Kyle's eyes rolled back in his head. The man tried to jerk his hand away, but Kyle ensnared it between his fingers and squeezed tight.

Tweek was there. In his head. In Richard's hands.

He just sat against a bed frame with his head hung low and his breathing shallow. His wrists hurt so badly. His hands were stinging, but numb at the same time. His body hurt so badly that all he wanted to do was scream until his soar throat gave out.

He resisted that terrible urge. At the top of the stairs a tiny, heaving body clutched to the makeshift railing. It cried out as it's unruly limbs searched for Tweek.

He couldn't scream. He couldn't cry.

He couldn't let Craig know how much pain he was in.

"I can't bear to hurt you anymore," his captor continued. "Please. Just tell me who was helping you. Just say their name- then we can all finally go to sleep- it can all be over."

Tweek remained silent.

"Hm, still so stubborn," the voice muttered. Tweek felt a hand run through his hair. He flinched, but didn't bother trying to jerk away. "You're so much like me, it's almost sickening."

Tweek felt his stomach churn at those words, but he wouldn't dare throw up again. Last time, he was forced to lick it off the floor.

"...I know something. Something that will change your mind," he muttered.

The man stood from where he was crouched before Tweek, and then walked back to the table situated across the room. Tweek stiffened, his breath rapid and terrified. The table was a terrible thing.

Craig cried from the top of the stairs when he heard the movement. His head tilted and swayed as he struggled to catch up with what was happening. Tweek lifted his head to get a glimpse of him; the only comforting sight he had.

Tweek didn't expect Craig to save him, even if the tiny spirit had the power to. Craig was just a child. Still in body and in mind. Being faced with the man who caused all this, the one who raped and murdered him, Tweek expected nothing more than for Craig to sit at the top of those stairs and cry.

Tweek was the grown up here. Tweek was the one who was supposed to protect Craig.

When his captor returned he didn't have in his hand a knife or bolt cutters. Instead, he held tightly to a book. It was white and rather large. The cover sported a plastic picture frame, though it was empty, and a dark brown smudge in one corner. Tweek narrowed his eyes at the thing, but was still wordless.

"I guess it's only fair if I tell you the whole story," he said. "Maybe then you'll understand."

Tweek doubted that.

His father crouched before him. The book was held lovingly against his chest when he cracked the cover open. Tweek's face twisted. Pictures were hidden inside, pictures Tweek would have slept much easier without seeing.

His eye twitched with the turn of each new page. On every one was another terrible spread of

another boy's defilement and, inevitably, demise. Tweek wanted to close his eyes, but by then he was well conditioned to know better. If Tweek didn't use them when his father wanted him to, he feared he'd lose them. So he sat there, eyes wide and mouth a trebling line.

"The first time I felt it was when you were three," Richard admitted. "I didn't want to do it. I couldn't let it be you. I found the first boy about a year later. I had to watch him for a while. I had to know when I could pick him up. I wasn't sure what I was going to do once I really had him, but it just came so naturally. After that, I wasn't nervous anymore."

He flipped the page again. Another boy who looked like all the others before. His eyes were wide, just like Tweek's, the color was the same too. In fact, his hair, his face, it was all comparable to Tweek. The disgusting things in those photos made his stomach twist and his head swim.

"There were five more after the first. I swore I'd stop after Thomas, this boy from North Park, was dead. I kicked the habbit," Richard said, as if he was talking about cigarettes. "I did, too. At least until he did what he did."

When the page was turned again Tweek had to look away. His eyes didn't close, but they shot up to the ceiling to avoid having to take in what was in front of him.

"Oh, no, no, no," Richard cooed softly. His hand found the bottom of Tweek's jaw and pulled his head back down. "You have to see this or else you won't understand how badly I need you to tell me that name."

Tweek squinted when he looked at the page. A small face greeted him. It was one most familiar, though he hadn't seen it so in tact in a long while. This was a little boy who looked nothing like Tweek, aside from his blue eyes.

Craig.

Tweek leaned forward to get a better look at that face. He wasn't smiling and happy like Tweek remembered. Instead, he was hunkered in a stone corner. His eyes down away from the camera. His face red.

He wore humiliation, but not much else.

Tweek's head tilted to the side as if it just became too heavy for him to bear. "He wasn't like the others. His eyes were just as beautiful, you know. So bright. So blue," Richard smiled before his gaze fell onto Tweek, who was clenching his teeth so tightly he thought they would burst out of his gums. "But he wouldn't stop STARING at at me. They followed me everywhere I went, and every time I tried to touch him, they'd leak when he cried. I hated it, you know? I had to take them out. Him looking at me like that made me feel..."

"Guilty," Tweek finished for him, teeth bared and snarling like a wild dog. "You knew him his whole life, you're friends with his father. You felt guilty."

Richard clasped his hands together and continued on as if he hadn't been so rudely interrupted. "Odd... it made me feel odd."

"He was different for another reason, too, though."

He flipped the page. Tweek's face twisted and his jaw clenched. Craig. His small, tiny creature. His helpless, sweet child. Those pictures were something Tweek never should have had to see. In them, Craig was broken, crying, violated. Tweek's chest heaved. He made strangled, angry sounds he didn't know any human was capable of.

"The others were all forced to die for you," Richard whispered.

"Die... for me..."

Richard nodded. "That's why all this happened. It's all because of you. I had to protect you, you know. You're my son. I love you. I didn't want to do that to you."

Tweek wasn't even listening. He was just staring, head tilting, eyes wet. He just stared at those vile pictures of Craig. His lips trebling, but mind like television static.

"Craig chose to die for you."

That caught Tweek's attention. His head raised from those disturbing images of his baby, and up to the man who took him away.

"He came willingly. I mean, sure, he tried to run, once, but he got in my car when I told him to. He followed me into the woods like I told him to. He knew what would happen to him. He knew what was going to come, but he still followed. Do you know why?"

Tweek only replied with rapid, dry breaths.

"He knew if he didn't, it would be you. He died for you. No, because of you. They all died because of you."

"Shut up," Tweek growled. He rolled his head around on his shoulders, but never closed his eyes. "You did this, not me. YOU did. Craig, he... I take care of him. I love him, I didn't- I didn't-"

"You didn't what? You didn't cause this?"

The page flipped again, to the last pictures he had in the book. Of course, Tweek's precious specter was the subject of them. Eyeless, bruised. He looked nothing like the first little Craig in that book. He looked like the Craig that cried at the top of the basement stairs.

He laid on the bed, the one behind Tweek. His head limp to the side. His pale, bruised legs apart and bloody. Tweek's sorrow bubbled up out of his chest and into his eyes. Silently, they leaked.

"He wouldn't stop screaming. I tried to choke him to make it stop, but he wiggled away from me. I told him I'd give him something worth crying about. It was an old bottle, but I didn't think it'd shatter like that."

Richard's finger slid down the page, towards the last square Polaroid the album bared. Craig, again. Still eyeless, still miserable. This time, though, the blood was pouring out of his face. Out of his mouth. White, hazy pieces of long, jagged glass was scattered on the sheets beside him. Pieces were lodged in the poor thing's mouth. In his throat.

The horror Tweek felt when he realized that jagged glass was familiar.

They weren't teeth.

He tightened his jaw and dropped his head. As wordless as ever, but raging underneath.

"He couldn't even speak," Richard said. "He could just... gurgle up blood. That poor thing. Poor little thing. I couldn't make out a word he was saying, but I think... I think he was crying for you."

"I suppose it was for the best. If he hadn't died that night, his eyes would have caused it later. They were getting puss in them, you see?"

"You're disgusting," Tweek said. His voice was so dry and small. He was too thirsty, too weak, to be as angry as he felt.

Richard wouldn't close the book. He kept it open against his chest; open to that picture of Craig choking on broken glass.

"You realize now, though, right?" Richard asked. "Look at all these terrible things."

Again, Richard ran his fingertips over the yellowing page.

"This world has no place for people like us. Like me. I'm going to erase it all. We'll all drown together where we belong. Just let me end it."

"How?"

"Tell me who was helping you. We can't leave any pieces behind. It all has to fade away along with us. Just tell me that name. That's all you have to do to make it stop."

Tweek couldn't even focus on the information his father was asking for. He couldn't stop staring at the mangled images of Craig.

"I won't do it."

"Boy," Richard said, more violent this time. "I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

He honestly couldn't remember anything in that moment. Tweek had to allow himself a long blink to conjure up bits and pieces of memories. Fiery red hair was the most vivid image in his mind. Large, green eyes. A kind smile. Everything Kyle was.

Kyle.

Tweek's gaze strayed from his father's eyes. He looked up to Craig, as if sight of the boy would inspire him to form a plan. There was no such luck, though, because Craig wasn't the only odd creature he caught sight of. There was another.

It stood beneath the staircase. Beneath Craig. It's large, reddened eyes glowered at the little boy through the gaps in the stairs. It's long, furry ears feathered across the wood when it lowered its head to face Tweek. It smiled at Tweek through the gross yellow light of the flood lamp. He could see it's buck teeth glisten in the darkness of the corner.

Richard jerked his head back as well. He tilted it a bit, and then shifted his gaze back to his son.

"What do you keep looking at?" he demands, his fists curling tightly.

"Craig!" Tweek demanded through his tight jaw. "Get up! Please, you have to get out of here!"

Those bulging, rabbit eyes stayed trained through the spaces between the basement stairs. Craig lifted his head. It tilted from side to side.

"Will you stop!" Richard braked with a sneer on his face. "We both know nothing's there. You aren't scaring me!"

Tweek couldn't even hear his father's raving.

"Listen to me!" Tweek spat to his trembling creature. "You have to stand! You know what that thing did to David, Craig. Please!"

"There's no one there!" Richard screamed with his hand reeling back. Tweek stiffened when it crashed back down across his face. "There was never anyone there! That's why it never scared me. You talked like you knew it all- but everything you said was wrong! A scared kid making up stories!"

Tweek didn't care about what Richard was saying or about the stinging in his jaw. It didn't phase him. All he was concerned about, as he had always been, was the tiny child cowering at the top of that staircase.

"Craig!" Tweek demanded, his voice stern and desperate. "Go!"

A boot met with his gut, and his words got crammed into his throat. The rabbit still stood under the stairs. Its big bulging eyes scraped in its head as its focus shifted. It seemed amused by Tweek's predicament.

"Shut up!"

The back of a hand again found the side of Tweek's face in a stingingly painful blow. Tweek went limp to one side, his greasy hair covering his face as he heaved for the breath he'd just lost.

"You're fucking crazy. Craig's dead, remember? I should know! And I'm going to prove it. Yeah, that's what I'll do."

Richard reached forward and took a painful hold of Tweek's ankle.

"If your ghost is here, he'd stop this- right?"

Those hands tore at him. At the zipper on the front of his jacket. At the buttons on the front of his dirty pants. He spit curses at first, and then he cried out pitiful pleas.

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. His wrists twisted and stung against their restraints, but there was no way he could make it stop. Thick fingers forced their way into the opening of his pants, and a screech burst from Tweek's throat.

"Please, no! Please!" His face twisted into a red, wet mess as he begged for his father to stop. His once strong voice was reduced to the trembling of a child. "Please don't. P-please."

"Shut your fucking mouth."

This was it. The punishment Craig endured all that time. The defilement, the shame. Tweek felt it all before he was even deprived of his jeans.

Under the sounds of Tweek's strangled cries, there was a growl. It was a low and angry warning as bone tipped fingers scraped against wood. Trembling lips curled back over jagged teeth of glass.

"No!" Tweek wailed, his feet kicking and his voice raspy. "Let go! Let go of me!"

The small apparition was more afraid for Tweek than he was of the man hurting him.

His wobbling, thin legs carried him down the steps one by creaking one. The rabbit watched each movement with a twitch of his pink nose. This was fun for him- Kyle could see it in the grin around those buck teeth.

This- this is what he wanted.

Craig showed his fangs. Arms cracked out of his contorted spine, growls spilled out of his

trembling jaw. Richard did turn around at the noise, but didn't hear it like his son did. He didn't see the quivering branches of flesh reaching for him.

Richard's hands spared the edge of Tweek's pants a few moments of mercy, but only because they preoccupied themselves by winding around Tweek's throat. They squeezed so tightly the boy felt his windpipe crushing together. His mouth spilled open for air, but it was fruitless.

Craig's tiny body staggered closer.

As Tweek soundlessly gasped, his father placed a kiss on his bottom lip.

"Oh, you poor, pretty thing."

Richard froze in terror when, through the flickering yellow light, he saw something peering at him below the throat he was crushing. A tiny, eyeless face hid in the folds beneath Tweek's jacket.

The pointed tips of bony fingers jerked forward and sliced deep into the man's face. The bone sank into wet, red flesh.

By instinct, Richard lurched back. Blood came pouring down Craig's arm. It soaked into his pretty rainbow sweater and left pools in Tweek's loose pants. Whatever oozing flesh Craig latched onto was left between the dead boy's clammy fingers.

Richard stumbled to his feet. He trembled wordlessly as he watched his fluids gush out of him and spill onto the floor. He pressed a loose, sagging flap of skin against his cheek; hiding his new gaping deformity behind his hand.

He stumbled backwards as Craig emerged on all fours. He kept most of himself engulfed in the safety of the jacket. His grinding, popping arms whined with every movement, but they reached yearningly towards Richard's last remaining eye.

"God, you were there. You were watching me through the keyhole," The man sputtered while retreating to the stairs.

Craig's oozing maw gaped open. Thick, jagged edges of dirty glass protruded from his torn gums. His remaining arms were folded back, ready to strike. His head tilted from side to side as he tried to hear where Richard fled to.

Tweek's breath became heavy and frightened when his father ran up the staircase. The thick, wooden door slammed hard behind him.

Tweek was again left there alone, still cuffed to the bed.

It was daylight. The wounded man was retreating from a shacklike structure. There were trees all around. The vivid vision was falling apart into just pictures and words.

In the woods.

He never left the woods.

Something searing hot soaked into the front of his parka. Only when Kyle blinked the color back into his eyes did he notice the steaming brown liquid. It seeped into the front of Kenny's coat. What didn't land on him had pooled around the empty paper cup at his feet.

It must have fallen off the counter when Richard was struggling to pry Kyle's fingers off of him.

"Where is he?" Kyle demanded, tears in his eyes. "What did you do, Richard?!"

The man didn't respond. He just stared at the bleeding boy.

"What did you do!?"

Kyle held his nose, which was gushing with blood, while he backed towards the exit.

"Shhh, you're fine," he heard Tweek's mother try to reassure him. "I think you had a bad seizure, okay? Do you need an ambulance?"

Both her and her one-eyed husband gawked at him as he backed into the front door. He pushed it open with a crimson covered hand, which smeared his blood on the glass as he shoved it open.

"Wait!" Mrs. Tweak called, but Kyle didn't listen. He ran down the street and didn't dare to stop.

Shadowman's Folly

The light cast through the dark was the only thing keeping Tweek awake. It shined from the flood light his father left on. It was a small comfort, but the batteries would wear down eventually. If, of course, they didn't outlive Tweek.

How long had it been since he'd been abandoned down there? Hours? Days? Weeks? He couldn't even venture to guess.

He wasn't alone, though. Craig sat in his lap. He was curled up in a ball, quiet and motionless. The two of them remained that way since Richard fled the room bleeding.

"Craig," Tweek said. His voice was cracking and small in a way it had never been before, but Craig heard it.

The boy rose his head to face the direction of Tweek's voice. His creaking, tired bones ground and whined when he raised up to sit straight. He laid his head in the crook of Tweek's neck, nuzzling there.

"I'm sorry it ended up like this," Tweek whispered. "It's my fault. I wish I would have known what he did to you. All that time I yelled at you for growling at him. You just wanted him away from me."

Tweek laid his head against Craig's and a small, weak sigh slipped out of his lips.

"I'm sorry... I just hoped that if I could find you it'd make things better. Like somehow digging up your body would get back everything you lost... I just wanted to see your eyes again." Tweek sucked in a steady breath, but his eyes were already wet. "I couldn't help you at all. I can't even help me. Craig... I think this might be it."

Craig's tiny fists twisted into Tweek's shirt and tugged hard. He cried out in protest, but Tweek's eyes were too heavy to keep open. He was so thirsty. His body hurt so bad. He was so tired.

"It's okay," he muttered. "I'll always be with you- always. Even if I can't fight anymore. Even if I..."

Tweek's eyes closed, and his face twisted in discomfort.

"...Even if I die."

Craig crawled off of Tweek's lap and stood. The arms that didn't belong to him wandered seemingly in confusion. They spread out across the dirty floor and tangled themselves in the steel bed frame. When Craig lowered to his knees, though, they all froze where they were and began to tremble. His sharp, jagged teeth came back to him.

"Craig... where are you?"

The trembling limbs shifted and bent to Craig's will. They spread over the cement floor until one found a loose brick. It heaved it out of the floor, and deposited it's find into one of Craig's real hands. He felt it for a moment, compensating for his loss of sight. "Where are you," Tweek asked again through his bloody teeth.

The boy felt the chain binding Tweek to the bed, and immediately began to beat on it with the

brick. He spat and growled and screamed as he struck the chain over and over, harder each time. He broke into angry wails when he realized the chain wouldn't give into him, but he didn't stop.

"Craig," Tweek repeated as he struggled to move his body. He put himself between the chain and Craig's crumbling brick. "It's okay."

Craig didn't seem to think so. He left the brick broken and abandoned on the floor, but his arms, under his influence, reached around to tear away at the unfazed metal.

Tweek could see it in Craig in that moment- the loss of control that destroyed the spirit in the tunnel and turned it into a monster.

Fear. He saw the boy's fear.

"Listen to me," Tweek managed to utter the agony in his jaw. Craig stopped, rigid and shaken.

"Okay, now, I need you to breathe." Craig's response were deep, quick breaths like a rabbit between a wolf's teeth.

"Do you remember when we were little? When your guinea pig died? You told me your life was good because I was there. Well... I wanted you to know that's how I felt, too. That's how I feel now. I know... I know this isn't how we wanted things to be. I always said I was supposed to be a famous actor. You were supposed to grow up to be an astronaut."

Tweek laughed a little, and the glass in Craig's mouth retreated back into his throat.

"This isn't how it was supposed to be, but at least we're together. That's... that's more than I could have ever asked for. And if I die down here, then you and I will really be together again."

Craig's face disappeared into Tweek's shoulder.

The small boy heaving in his lap opened his mouth. As usual, dark, congealed blood oozed out of his lips as they moved. He wanted so badly to talk back. It hurt so badly. The jagged ends of glass dug into his throat with every attempted word, and clumps of drying blood muffled any sound he would have made.

His mouth remained open, and his jaw cracked when it moved.

"It's okay," Tweek said again as he nuzzled his nose into the side of Craig's face.

Then, he heard something he never thought he'd hear again.

Something that came out of Craig's quivering jaw.

Unlike the chorus of children that usually spilled out of Craig's mouth, it was just one voice. One quiet, trembling voice that left his ears ringing and his heart thumping hard. The voice was one he remembered better than anything, but what it said was new.

"I..." came out first. It was choked and gurgled, but it was Craig's. "I..."

Tweek sat silently. His eyes were closed and his breath shallow.

"I love you."

At first, there was only silence around them. Tweek sank a little lower. The handcuffs pulled a little harder against his wrists. His wet eyes soundlessly spilled over.

"I... I love you, too."

He closed his eyes tightly and dropped his head down against Craig's. His shoulders quaked and sorry sounds bubbled out of his throat.

"So much. I love you so much."

...

He couldn't remember the last time he rode a bike, but it was true what they said. Once you learned it's something you'd never forget. Kyle's legs pushed to move the bike through the slowly mounting snow. The bike wasn't his, but instead a neighbor's who'd left it laying in their front yard. It would get him there faster than walking, and he needed to be as far away as he could be before anyone noticed he was missing again.

The snow fell so thick he could hardly see in front of him. The street lamps helped, thankfully. They were the only thing guiding his way to the pond.

By the time he made it to the church he was already short winded. He rolled to a stop in the big, empty parking lot. His breath made small clouds as he dismounted and leaned the stolen bike against a light pole.

The pond was just a short walk away now, and the bike would be useless in the woods.

He rubbed his hands on Kenny's parka to try and regain some warmth in them. He reached in the pocket and pulled out a red bandanna. He couldn't bare to leave it behind, so he wrapped it around his face, and then raised his hood to protect his ears from the chill. This was it.

He couldn't turn back now. He left the bike where it was, hoping one way or another it would be returned to it's owner. Then, he walked. Once he reached the edge of the Church the street lights no longer helped. Their guiding light faded away. He pulled his flashlight of of his messenger bag, but the small beam of light didn't comfort him like the lamps had.

"Stan?" Kyle muttered as he tugged at one of the yarn bracelets around his wrist. "Are you there?"

He didn't get a reply, though he didn't know what he was expecting.

"I'm not sure if you are or not, but I... I have to confess something to you."

Again, silence answered. He squeezed his toes in his socks to try and warm them.

"I'm so scared," he whispered. "I don't know what I'm going to find tonight, or how different things will be tomorrow."

"Sometimes I wish I could go back in time just so I could talk to you again. You'd know just what to say. You always did." Kyle took in a deep breath and tipped his head back. "And I know I wasn't there for you like I should have been, but all I need right now is to know that you're here with me tonight. That I'm not all alone."

A feeling of fear bubbled up in his chest at first when he felt fingertips sliding down the back of his arm. Somehow, the digits were inside of his clothes, as if they'd been waiting in his sleeve. They were warm, though. The fingers slipped down his palm and interlaced with his own, squeezing tightly.

Kyle closed his watering eyes and steadied his breath before he could squeeze back.

"Are you ready?" He asked. The hand squeezed tighter.

"Okay."

And so he walked. Quickly at first, but slower when he hit the pond. The water was starting to freeze over. Little layers of ice crept off of the shore, but the fish were still swimming freely. In a month or so, the pond would be open for ice skaters, as it was every year. Would people still use the pond at all after tonight? After the whole godforsaken town finally knew the truth?

This was another question that could only be answered by time.

He tiptoed past the rickety shack of a public bathroom, past the quiet docks, and into the tree line.

He hadn't been in those woods since the day Tweek went missing. Stepping into the thicket did not feel the same as it did before.

He followed his memorized path to the abandoned house in the woods. All the while his flashlight scanned the tall trunks and fluttering snowflakes around him. The woods were deafeningly silent. They were either still angry at him for forcing them to talk, or they were mourning.

After much walking, he finally caught rotting siding in the beam of his flashlight. He clutched onto the strap of his backpack with his free hand, and then jogged to the back door. The decrepit wood looked like the shack he saw in Richard's hands. Even though Tweek wasn't there, it was the best place to start.

He slammed the kitchen door behind him; the darkness of the forest felt like a monster he had to keep out. Then, he turned to face the room. His eyes lingered on the floor where he once found Tweek sleeping. An odd feeling swept over him when he realized Tweek had once been there. At one time, there, but in another, gone.

He walked through the living room and listened to the wind whistle through the gaps in the windows. He walked up the stairs and observed the blood on the floor. There wasn't nearly as much as he remembered there being. There were drops and streaks, but it wasn't the gory bloodbath his mind tricked him into thinking it was.

He spent time in the bedroom they hung the boy's pictures in, but he didn't stay there long. He looked through the drawers in the dresser in the hallway. Still, nothing spoke to him. It was as if the house was too afraid to tell him its secrets.

He began to believe houses, trees, places, could all be affected like people could.

They could all be affected by the things they'd seen.

It would explain why Craig's bedroom was so eager to tell Kyle all about the boy who used to inhabit it, but the woods didn't dare speak about where that boy disappeared to.

He ran his fingers over the banister on his way back down. He could try to force the house to speak, but even if it told him anything he'd be too incapacitated to act.

He sat on the bottom stair, wrapped his coat tightly around him, and tried to think of his next course of action. Somewhere. Tweek was obviously somewhere in those woods.

It was then in his silence he heard a sound. Small vibrations plagued the plank of wood he sat on, and heavy scratching assaulted his ears. He jolted up off the staircase and took a step back. The scratching turned into bangs.

Slowly, Kyle circled around the staircase. His eyes locked onto a closet nestled beneath them. The small door didn't move, but the angry sounds came from inside. He steadied his flashlight in front of him. Besides the chipping white paint, there was nothing peculiar about the door.

"H-hello?" he demanded, and then took a step forward. "Who's there?"

The banging stopped, but was replaced by loud, livid growls.

He bit his bottom lip and wrapped his fingers around the loose metal door handle. He jumped back when he swung it open, but there was nothing inside. The beam of his flashlight cut through the dark in the tiny room. He leaned inside, his eyes scanning every inch and corner. The closet looked like it'd been abandoned mid-construction. There were no plastered walls, but only exposed wooden beams and patches of insulation. It was eerie in the limited glow he cast on it, but nothing else.

There was no one there.

However, there was a tiny piece of metal embedded to the wall on his right. He never would have noticed if it didn't shine his light back into his eyes. He fiddled with the odd piece of metal. It looked like a handle that belonged to a cabinet door, but it didn't budge when he pulled on it. He shined his beam higher, and more metal glinted back at him.

A set of sliding locks were drilled into the wooden beams. He got onto his tiptoes and pried them apart, then bit his lip as he pushed at the heavy slab of wood. He backed away as it slowly creaked open. Beyond the hidden door was mostly just black. Swallowing down his fear, he approached with his flashlight in hand. Another set of stairs greeted him. They were old and rotting, and most of them were devoured by the darkness below.

Kyle never knew that house had a basement. And, he assumed, Tweek never would have either if he didn't go looking for one.

In the beam of his light, pairs of eyes shined back at him from between the railings of the staircase. He let out a small cry and shined his light on them, but the shadows scurried away from the abrasive glow to hide.

They whispered to each other so low that Kyle couldn't make out what they were saying, but he heard them echo. He yanked his red bandanna off his face and around his neck.

"Tweek?" He whispered at first, and then repeated himself louder.

Tweek didn't answer, but something else did.

It was a low, gravelly hiss that crept up from the pit and into his ears. He recognized the warning.

"Craig?"

Wood cried beneath his boots when he gathered the courage to step down onto the first stair. The hissing got louder, but it didn't deter Kyle.

He stepped down until he was low enough to sweep his flashlight around the room. What he saw in it's beam, though, was not what he expected.

There were children. Six? Seven? He didn't know. They were all huddled together beside a bed. Their forms intertwined as they hold one another in fear. The apparitions shivered and whimpered, whispering to one another.

Their faces were all familiar, and they all gawked at his presence. He took another step closer, and his heart lodged in his throat when he realized one of the boys was not like the rest. He was not awake and huddling. Instead, he sat limp against the bed frame. His head drooped to one side. The other boys surrounded him. They clung to his clothes, held to his shoulders, piled around him, as if they were protecting him.

"Tweek," Kyle whispered. His jaw quivered when he realized how motionless the boy was. How sick and dead he appeared.

He took steps that were quick and desperate.

Something shot out between the open slats of the staircase and jerked at his ankle. He caught himself on the railing, but his flashlight went tumbling down the steps and then smashed against the cement floor at the bottom. In the flickering, frantic line of light, he could see something waiting for him at the bottom. He shivered as his flashlight rolled away and collided with the wall. The beam illuminated a pair of pale feet. The faint growling became ravenous and animalistic- like a pack of bloodthirsty dogs.

And Kyle was the intruder that defiled their den.

The small, trembling feet swayed towards the bottom step, and Kyle fell back as he tried to scramble away. He jerked and kicked his leg, but a bony pair of hands held his ankle captive between them.

"Craig! Let me go!" Kyle demanded, but the hands did not release him, and the small silhouette was climbing the staircase. It scurried towards him on creaking hands and knees, screaming like a wild animal. Kyle managed to jerk away from the hand squeezing his leg, but a plethora of others shot up from beneath the wood to ensnare him. He wasn't even touching the ground anymore.

"Stop!"

The scream wasn't Kyle's, but it still didn't deter the beast. Craig's sharp fingers were already embedding into Kyle's shoulders, and two rows of broken, bloody glass gaped open to peel away the skin of his face.

He slammed his eyes closed and screamed.

"Craig! It's Kyle! It's not Richard! Stop! Please stop!" It was Tweek.

Kyle could feel rancid breath puff onto his cheeks. It smelled thickly of road kill, and it was hot and wet. The arms around him squeezed so tight and hard he couldn't move anything except his left arm. Cautiously, he reached out to touch the face contemplating his fate.

"Craig. It's me. Please let go. You're hurting me," he pleaded breathlessly.

Suddenly, Kyle was falling. Gravity slammed him against groaning wood, and he nearly went tumbling down the stairs.

Craig was nowhere to be seen, but Kyle could feel him shifting in the shadows. Ignoring to fear in his stomach, he caught his breath and bolted to the bottom. He snatched his flashlight off the floor, and then waved it around the room.

The boys were all suddenly missing, but Craig's mass of arms twisted and intertwined like writhing snakes under the stairs. Kyle's fear subsided when he again caught Tweek's slouched body in his sight.

His footsteps echoed around the basement as he rushed to his friend. Tweek's head rolled on his shoulders like he wanted to look up, but didn't have the strength. His eyes were black, and a gash cracked the skin of his forehead and cheek.

"Oh, Tweek. God," was all Kyle could manage.

Tweek tipped his head away from Kyle's bright light and blinked in discomfort.

"Kyle," Tweek replied. "How did you find me?"

"That doesn't matter right now. Fuck," Kyle growled as he felt Tweek's bound wrists. "You're handcuffed?"

"Yeah."

"Where's the key?"

"On my dad."

"Fuck, shit. How the hell am I supposed to get you loose?" Kyle panicked aloud.

"On the table- there's a pair of bolt cutters," Tweek said.

Clutching his only source of light, Kyle hurried to the old table across the room. He smiled when metal blades glinted back at him, but that smile wavered into a look of horror when he saw what lay beside them. Four human fingers. The wood beneath them was stained a darker hue than the rest of the table, and they began to bloat and rot without fresh blood running through them. The skin had turned plastic looking and pale, but he could still clearly see the dirt caked under their big square fingernails.

He snatched the bolt cutters off of the table, and quickly returned to Tweek's side. His friend leaned forward and pulled his wrists apart so Kyle could reach the chain. He knelt down beside the bed frame, and his stomach rolled in a sick way when he saw Tweek's hands. The flesh was bleeding and torn where the handcuffs were eating into his wrists. Some places were particularly bad. The cuts split open into puss filled wounds. Gauze was wrapped around the stubs of where his fingers used to be. They were hard with dried blood and scabs. They hadn't been changed in three days, at least.

"Kyle, please hurry," Tweek begged.

"Oh, oh, okay."

He raised the bolt cutters up and situated the chain between its blades. One of its long handles touched the floor for leverage, and Kyle pushed with all his might against the other. He strained before letting out a final large heave.

The chain snapped, and Tweek's arms fell like dead meat to his sides. He slid against Kyle's side, where he curled and hissed in pain.

"Oh, god. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

"No," Tweek croaked. "No, my arms just feel like they're on fire."

Kyle wrapped his arms around Tweek, but was careful not to squeeze. Despite the screaming in Kyle's head to get up and drag Tweek out of that place, he remained still. He and Tweek both did,

as his friend's shoulders were heaving with sobs.

"I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner," wobbled out of Kyle's mouth. He couldn't help but remember he was there just hours after Tweek was first taken. He ran down those fucking stairs and didn't even look through the house to make sure he wasn't there. If Kyle would have just stopped to think, he would have found Tweek days ago.

"I'm so sorry- I saw what he did- what he tried to do- I- I'm-"

Tweek heaved out a dry cough, and then shook his head.

"I'm happy," Tweek admitted. "I thought... I'd never see you again."

Kyle couldn't resist the urge to squeeze Tweek's shoulders just the slightest bit, but his limp friend didn't protest.

"Do you think you'll be able to walk up?" Kyle asked. He looked again at the distorted and heaving mass of limbs beneath the stairs. "We need to get you to a hospital."

"No," Tweek argued from his place on the floor.

"Okay, I'll help you, then I'm going to call the police."

"No! No, I mean... I don't want to go to the hospital. Not yet."

"Tweek your fucking fingers are missing- you're wrists are infected, if you don't get to a hospital like right now you could lose your hands!"

"I don't care," Tweek argued while using those same mangled extremities to push himself up.

"Why the fuck not? Jesus, Tweek. You need help!"

"Craig is buried in here."

Kyle went quiet, and Tweek looked around the room for his shovel.

"Where?"

"Under the bricks you're sitting on."

Kyle launched up off of the floor and illuminated the haphazardly placed bricks.

"Kyle. I won't leave him down here alone, not again."

Water

When they found Tweek's shovel it was placed between a saw and a pistol on Richard's table. Kyle would have asked how it managed to end up in such a peculiar place, but the blood on the spade and the gash on Tweek's forehead told him all he needed to know.

"Tweek, I know how important this is to you, believe me," Kyle began. He gently lay his hand on Tweek's shoulder as his friend struggled to hold his shovel. "But it'd be best for everyone if we call the police and get you out of here. They'll be able to get to Craig much easier than we would, and you'd be somewhere safe."

"I'll never be safe," Tweek reasoned as he pressed the tip of his shovel between two bricks.

Kyle's frown sank even lower on his face while he watched Tweek fight to overturn the dirt-caked rectangles.

"That's not true. If worse comes to worse, you could just pack your bags and start over somewhere far away from here. I'd... I'd come with you."

"It could be like all this didn't happen," Kyle continued. "Like we met at the grocery store in the cereal aisle. Like we bonded over chess or something and not..." he paused to gesture around the room. "This."

His voice echoed off the blood stained walls, in the hollow holes in Craig's head. Tweek held his tool aloft while trying to envision such a thing. As if they and leave this all behind and live a carefree life somewhere far away.

When Tweek looked up at his friend through the dim, yellow light, those well-meaning fantasies shriveled and died in his gut. He hadn't noticed before, but Kyle's throat was blotched with painful looking bruises. Not only that but when Kyle first joined the crusade, his eyes were bright and determined. Now, they sagged with worry and unsavory experience.

"I like the way that sounds, but even if I run away, even if my dad gets locked up for the rest of his life, that life will have to end eventually," Tweek had to take a moment to catch his breath. Even just talking in length was enough to leave him drained. "What's stopping him from coming back? Who knows what he'll be able to do when he does. Running away won't change that, and it won't help Craig. He died in this room, I won't leave him here."

Tweek's sunken eyes shifted away, and he tightened his jaw before finishing with, "A life with me is the last thing you'd want, anyway."

Kyle squeezed his bottom lip between his teeth. He disagreed but didn't say so.

"Alright, but I don't see how we're gonna do this," Kyle said as he watched Tweek clumsily attempt to loosen the bricks with his shovel. "You can't even hold it, let alone have the strength to dig a grave."

"I can do it," Tweek persisted. He grappled the tip of the handle with the only two fingers he had on his left hand; his index and his thumb. His right hand, which had all but his pinkie, gripped the shovel's middle.

His arms still felt achy, and every movement stung and burned beneath his skin. His jaw clutched, and he hissed in agony when he finally flipped a brick over.

Kyle frowned, then looked back down at the patchy brickwork.

"Let me change your bandages, then I'll dig it for you."

Tweek looked back at Kyle as if he'd just insulted him, but then he looked back to his hands. Somehow his father managed to take away everything. First, Craig, which in turn took Tweek's normal life. Now that he stood there above the grave he'd searched so desperately for all that time, his father made sure he'd never dig it up.

"Fine," Tweek whispered. He laid the shovel down on the bed in favor of the flashlight Kyle handed to him.

With his right hand, he aimed it into Kyle's backpack. Seems his friend came along almost over prepared. God only knows what all he had packed in there, but after a little digging he yanked out a white box bearing a red cross.

"Let me see your hand."

Tweek obliged, and Kyle's fingers carefully picked apart the gauze. It was so fused together with dry, caked blood he had to use a pocket knife to separate them. Tweek grimaced and whined as Kyle squeezed. When the dirty gauze was removed, Tweek got a look at his bare, mutilated hand. It didn't even feel natural on the end of his arm. It was both gory and incomplete, and his stomach flipped when he tried to move fingers that simply weren't there. Not even a nub was left behind.

"Kyle, do you think... they can be put back?"

Kyle bit his lip. He was busy cleaning off the blood from Tweek's hand with wet wipes when he heard the question. He used the distraction as a way to not answer, and Tweek didn't ask again.

The next few minutes were spent tending to Tweek rather than digging. Kyle gave him food and water, then after he'd emptied every plastic baggy and water bottle, Kyle gave him a change of clothes. Tweek felt worlds better after changing out of his piss-soaked jeans and into a pair of Kyle's sweatpants. Despite all that, though, he still felt too weak to stand.

He opted to rest nearby on the floor while Kyle gathered his shovel.

Craig listened intently while Kyle swung the tool up over his head and smashed its metal end into the floor. He used brute force to dislodge the bricks, and the boy flinched with every piercing sound. This went on for some time. At least long enough for Kyle's shovel to smash into the chest that was buried beneath them. He carefully scooped shovel full after shovel full, running out of breath as he did so. When Kyle could finally make out the trunks green lid, Craig began to growl.

"Shhh," Tweek cooed to the boy on his lap. He wrapped his arms around the child and squeezed him close, but it didn't deter Craig's angry sounds.

"Is he okay?" Kyle asked, his shovel stalling by his side.

"I don't know," Tweek replied, his voice echoing faintly. "Something's upset him."

Craig's feet planted on the ground, and he hunched in Tweek's lap like a snake in a coil. One of his many hands latched onto the handle of Kyle's shovel and yanked so hard it ripped out of Kyle's grasp. The tool flew into the darkness across the room with a violent clatter, but Craig's angry screams didn't cease.

"Fuck, Craig, calm down!" Tweek demanded as he tried to subdue the boy against his chest. "He's

trying to help you, brat!"

Kyle stood motionless in front of the small hole he managed to dig before Craig snatched the shovel away. He wanted to intervene but feared Craig too much to touch him.

Craig burst out of Tweek's arms. His hands clutched to the front of Tweek's shirt. He yanked hard as he stood, trying to force Tweek to his feet. His poor friend was too weak to stand, so he stumbled across the concrete floor instead.

Tweek grabbed at the shredded fingers latched onto his shirt; the arms attached to Craig's shoulders. He pulled Craig down to his bare knees and held him there.

"I know you don't want us to be down here," Tweek tried to reason calmly. "But the sooner we get you out of the floor the sooner we can leave."

Craig released Tweek's shirt to cup his hairy chin instead. His head shook, and desperate sounds bubbled from the blood in his throat. He was trying to say something, but Tweek couldn't make out what it could be.

"I think he wants us to stop digging and just leave," Kyle nearly whispered, as if Craig would turn on him if he spoke too loudly.

Tweek blinked, and then gazed up at the creature holding his face.

"Is that true?" Tweek asked. "I just... I don't understand."

"You... don't," Craig managed to croak. The more he tried to force words out, the deeper the glass dug into his throat. He choked on it, and fresh blood seeped into the cracks between his teeth.

The boy's chest quaked with cries of frustration. When he realized how hard it was to explain himself, that frustration quickly changed to hopelessness. He sobbed, and Tweek stroked his tarlike tears away with his thumb. One of the few fingers he had left.

"You don't have to talk," Tweek softly assured the boy.

Craig shook his head, then slapped away Tweek's hand.

"Wait!" Tweek called as Craig turned away from him and bolted up the stairs. The old wood slammed beneath his bare feet as hard as Tweek's heart against his ribs. Tweek hoisted his aching body off the floor. His legs burned painfully and his arms were practically useless. He stumbled again, and then crashed to the floor, unable to catch his fall.

Kyle ran to his friend's aid.

"Are you okay?" Kyle gasped as he took a gentle hold of his friend's arms to help him stand.

"F-fuck, ugh. Yeah. Craig. I have to get to the top floor. He's probably hiding up there."

"There's no way you'll make it up two flights of stairs."

Tweek grunted at the realization, then begrudgingly muttered: "You'll have to go."

"Um... me?" Kyle spat, his face twisting up at just the suggestion.

"I know he's scary sometimes, but he's really just a terrified little kid. Talk to him. Bring him down."

That was easy for Tweek to say. In all the years he cared for the tiny creature, Craig never tried to rip his face off. Kyle had not been so fortunate.

"What do I say?" Kyle asked as he helped Tweek sit on the bottom stair.

"Just tell him it's you. Remember he can't see- he has to hear you," Tweek had to stop to take a few feeble breaths. "And... and don't touch him, not unless he touches you first. He's weird with that, and-"

"Okay, okay. I get it, be gentle, but what do I say?"

"He just ran out of the room crying," Tweek reminded him. "What would you say to anybody?"

Kyle paused and nodded his head. "What about you?"

"I won't leave this step," Tweek lied. "Just come get me when you get him down."

"Okay, okay," Kyle repeated to himself as he grabbed the rickety rail. "I'll try."

"And, Kyle?"

Kyle shined his light at the bottom of the stairs, cutting through the dark. Tweek squinted, then asked one small request.

"When I touched him, he was cold. Could you give him my jacket?"

Kyle promised, and he took the long black cloak with him when he ascended the stairs. When he left, so did the glow of his flashlight. Tweek watched it grow dimmer and dimmer until Kyle disappeared around the corner; this left him drowning in darkness.

He lived up to his promise of staying still, at least until the creaking of Kyle's sneakers faded like his light had.

There were no more sounds. No more sights. Only the smell of earth in the air and the taste of it on his tongue.

As weak as he was, he could still rise to his resistant legs. It had been so long since he used them, but they carried him across the room, beside the iron framed bed where Craig's hole was.

Because of the pitch blackness engulfing the room, he couldn't see it. He could only scrape the edge of his toes across the cement until he felt loose soil beneath his heel.

To his knees, he fell. His hands were mutilated, but not useless. He used his palms to dig around the lid of Craig's box. Not much, but just enough for him to feel the silver lock keeping it shut.

He dug his pointer fingers into the metal and smashed it between the lock and the dirt as he fought to force it open. The metal tab popped up. Despite the stinging in his hands and the warm liquid trailing down his wrists, he managed to grip the lid and yank. The wood was so degraded it didn't open. Instead, his hands tore off a large chunk of partially rotted wood.

A new smell filled the air.

The musk was foul and sharp; it was nothing like the fresh earth under his knees. It seeped out of the damaged trunk and into his clothes. Into his lungs. It was familiar.

It smelled like Craig, but stronger.

He covered his nose for a moment and let his eyes water. Next time he took a breath, he let out a gagging cough.

Still, he did not stop.

His bandages became warm with blood as he ripped another chunk out of the lid. Then another, and another. There were scratches in the broken pieces. They were deep enough for Tweek to feel on the underside, as if a wild animal tried to scrape its way out.

When all was stripped away, the smell was worse. It filled the room and lingered in the air so thick Tweek could taste it when he breathed in.

His body shook to the core. Partially from the pain and partially from the cold, but he still reached his arms into the hole.

He ran his fingers over cloth. It was soft in some places but grimy and hard in others. A shirt. He felt the bump of a rib beneath his fingertips. From there, he traced the hemline to the bony peak of a shoulder, and from there an arm.

The flesh aged like leather, but it was still there.

Carefully, he slipped his hands beneath the tiny body. The shriveled husk of a corpse was fused to the wood floor of the truck, but with gentle coaxing, he lifted it out of the hole.

For a long time, he idled there on his knees.

The stench of the corpse soaked into him, but he held it closer. His cheek brushed against the top of something soft and round. The puffball of a tiny blue hat. With the few fingers he had left, he gently pulled on the earflaps.

"If I'd have found you sooner, you could hold me back," Tweek whispered into the top of the grimy cloth. "I'm sorry."

...

The child cowered in a closet. He huddled in the farthest corner, tucked away out of sight. He always hid there when he was angry with himself. The arms tethered to his back sprawled out stiff and afraid against the walls. The tiny space was practically lined with quivering flesh.

The door's rusted hinges creaked open. Craig panicked, but when he caught the smell of Tweek his body relaxed.

Someone knelt in the doorway. Their movements were slow as not to startle the tiny creature. Craig sniffed the air and cooed, expecting to hear Tweek's soothing voice.

The person with him, however, didn't speak.

Craig let out an anxious cry and then scratched at his empty eye sockets with the tips of his mutilated fingers.

"Craig, it's me, Kyle... I'm gonna come in, I hope that's okay."

Against his better judgment, Kyle slid into the closet alongside the little boy. Craig didn't seem to care as he continued shredding the insides of his sockets with his fingers.

Kyle curled his legs against his chest and wrapped his arms around them. There wasn't much room

to even breathe in that closet.

"Tweek wanted me to give you this," Kyle said as he laid a black, folded cloth between them. "It's his coat."

Craig's tiny hand reached with distrust. When he felt the fabric under his fingers he whimpered, snatched it up, and then tangled himself in the familiar jacket.

"You were calm until I hit the trunk," Kyle observed. "I couldn't help but think you didn't want us to look inside."

Craig stopped cuddling his new favorite thing, but it remained clutched in his fists.

"Surely that's not true, right? Your body is what you've been trying to lead us to."

Craig's hands abandoned his eyeless sockets in favor for pulling at his too-big shirt. His bottom lip trembled, and he shook his head 'no'.

Kyle blinked with his brows furrowing.

"If that's not what you wanted all this time, what is?"

Gurgling and choking, Craig could only continue to shake his head.

Kyle needed more, but figuring things out was difficult when he could only ask questions that could be answered with a yes or a no.

The boy shifted closer. Kyle swallowed as pointed, bony fingertips sank into the sleeve of Kenny's parka. Craig couldn't see Kyle's green eyes roll into the back of his head, but he felt his limbs quiver.

Again, Craig force fed him a vision. Brown gradients and a rippling surface enveloped Kyle's mind. Desperate sloshing caused his arms to jerk, and water in his throat made his mouth gape open for air.

It was the same terrible vision he saw when he reunited with Tweek in the coffee shop. When he accidentally touched Tweek's hand.

The vision of someone's violent, watery death.

When Kyle felt the big hands grab the front of his shirt, though, the attacker's face wasn't distorted through the water. He came up once. His lungs burned like coals. A breath of air filled his lungs, and Richard's face struck terror in him.

Then, he was under again.

When Kyle lurched, his eyes returned. He rubbed them as if he could scrub the vision out of his eyes. He still didn't understand it. Craig died in the basement. Not under Stark Pond's surface. It must have been one of the other boy's death. Yet the boy insisted on them witnessing it over and over.

"You always had the power to show me the whole vision, didn't you? To show Tweek? Why would you hide his face from us?"

Craig nodded, and then a pitiful cry spilled out of him. The boy rocked back and forward as the holes in his head leaked like tears. His hands covered his ears, and he nodded harder and harder

with each rock.

The boy was ashamed of what he'd done. For some reason, all that time, Craig easily could have shown them everything.

Kyle always believed Craig was on their side, but, in a way, he had been lying to them. To protect Richard? That didn't sound right. In spite of feeling betrayed, Kyle reminded himself the person sitting beside him was a child. A child that understood the word betrayal better than Kyle ever could.

"I wish I could ask why," Kyle said through clenched teeth, "but... I think I can guess."

Craig raised his head, and then aimed his eyeless sockets towards the sound of Kyle's voice.

"I saw some of the things Richard did... I wouldn't have wanted to show my best friend those things, either. Especially not if it was his own father."

Kyle tried to ignore all the little hands that decided they appreciated his forgiveness. They skittered around the walls like tiny creatures and trembled in his lap, rested in his hair.

Craig wrapped his arms around himself, then small, gurgling sounds spilled out of him. He wanted to talk. Forcing all the boys to come together to form sentences wasn't an easy task while they were distracted, and he couldn't do it on his own.

Kyle sat for a short while and listened to Craig practice words that sounded more like painful moans than anything. Sounds came out, but the glass shredded every syllable. In frustration, Craig let out an angry wail and threw his tiny fist against the unfazed wall.

"My fault," Kyle managed to make out of Craig's screams. "Mine!"

"What is?"

Craig sank deep into the corner and curled into a trembling ball. Voices uttered hushes all around, but they were too disorganized to come together. At least until they realized Craig was crying. Then, every small voice fell silent, and the hands crawling the walls scurried back to the body they were attached to.

They wrapped around the creature and lent him their voices.

"When Tweek's asleep, he cries," they whispered in unison. "He cries my name; he cries for me."

Kyle squeezed his legs closer to his chest but didn't speak. To such a jarring confession, he didn't know what to say.

"Everything is wrong. I ruined him."

"That's not true."

"I ruin everything."

"No!" Kyle barked louder than he meant to. Craig flinched at the sound.

"You didn't ruin anything. It's not your fault things turned out this way. Richard made those decisions. You were just a little boy, there's nothing you could have done! It's... it's not your fault."

Uttering those words made him feel an uneasy twisting in his guts. They sounded an awful lot like

the same thing Kenny said to him just a few days prior.

Maybe, in some ways, he and Craig were more alike than he thought.

Kyle rested his chin on his knees.

"Tweek lost everything. His whole life. Over me," the children said.

"And if you showed him what happened, he would have lost his father, too. Because of you," Kyle observed. "But you're more than just Tweek's problem."

A tiny whimper quaked out of Craig's torso. He didn't agree.

Raising his head, Kyle argued, "Craig, I swear that you were always more than what Richard did. You aren't worth any less right now than you were before he touched you."

Craig's bloody palms reclaimed his ears. Again, his head shook, but much harder than it did before. Kyle slid closer to the cowering boy, trying his best not to cry himself. There had to be some way he could make Craig believe it. He scoured his mind for memories of who Craig was in life. It was hard, since they didn't speak much, but there was one thing Kyle never forgot.

"You know, when you and I first met in the woods, I didn't recognize you. You changed so much because of all this. But, sometimes... I see the boy I sat across from in art class," Kyle said, a small smile unfolding. "That's been so long ago, now... Do you remember?"

Craig's fingers parted so he could better hear Kyle, and then he nodded.

"You hated me because of the whole Peru thing, so you drew a dick on one of my pictures and turned it into the teacher."

Craig's hand's jerked to his mouth to stifle his giggling.

Yes, despite everything, Craig was still a little asshole.

A lopsided smile found Kyle's lips.

"See."

The small boy's big grin faded to a confused line.

"I know... I know when you were alive, Richard was too strong. You couldn't stop him. But it's not like it was before. You're the one with the power. Not Richard. It's okay to be sad and angry sometimes. God, after what happened to you, you have every right to feel all the things you're feeling. You have to feel them, but they don't have to control you or dominate who you are. Now, he can only have as much control over you as you give him.

"No one can hurt you without your consent."

Craig didn't move. He didn't cry anymore or try to speak again. He only listened.

"I saw what you did to him when he tried to hurt Tweek in the basement. You didn't let him control you, then. You love Tweek more than you fear Richard. That takes a lot of strength in itself."

Craig uttered a tiny sound.

"That's why you came back, isn't? If it wasn't for your body, it must have been for Tweek."

Craig's pale, blood-streaked face nodded. It seemed to stare at Kyle even without eyes. Again, his tattered fingertips reached forward and clutched Kyle's sleeve. The boy twisted the cloth until it wound tightly around Kyle's wrist. He twisted until he couldn't anymore, then held it there.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

Craig's hands clasped Kyle's wrist and shook it. Black ooze again spilled out of his eye-holes and his mouth distorted.

Kyle was disturbed, but thankful the boy wasn't forcing that vision into his head like the last time he'd grabbed his sleeve.

Wait...

"You never even cared whether or not we found out how you died, but you keep showing us a death that isn't yours. It wasn't you who drowned."

Craig nodded his head, still shaking Kyle's limp arm in desperation.

"And you came back... to protect Tweek."

Kyle's watering eyes widened. He had to force himself to breathe.

"To warn Tweek."

Endlessness

Tweek sat where Kyle left him. It was still dark. He still shivered from the cold. However, he held something new.

Craig's body.

He'd wrapped it tightly in soiled bedsheets and his arms. It was but a shriveled shell of the boy it once was. Still, if he kept it close, it's severed spirit might feel his warmth.

Sorrow engulfed him as he clutched the corpse with his few, bloody fingers.

Craig was once the warm one. He was the summer asphalt under Tweek's feet. He was the huff of white breath in the Winter. The first flower of Spring. The last leaf of Autumn. He was everything.

When Craig's heart stopped, so did all those beautiful things.

So did Tweek.

The door at the top of the stairs squeaked at its hinges, and the beam of a flashlight cut the dark. He felt its light rest on his shoulders as someone scurried down to him.

"We have to go," Kyle said, short of breath.

Tweek turned and squinted against the light. When he did, Kyle saw what he held against his chest. His light shined into the empty hole that was Craig's grave, and then to the sheet-covered form in Tweek's arms.

"I lied. I'm sorry," Tweek whimpered.

"It's okay... It's okay," Kyle assured. "But we have to go- now."

Tweek's bottom lip quivered because he knew Craig's body would be left behind.

"Okay."

He moved the corpse towards Kyle, holding it out for him.

"Um, what are you doing?"

"I... can't stand well."

Kyle's nose turned up when he exchanged his flashlight for Tweek's gory bundle. The stench of putrid flesh made him gag, but he stood with it against against his chest anyway.

"Will we come back for him?" Tweek asked.

"The police will. They'll take better care of him than we could."

"What? But they'll cut him up."

Kyle laid the small body on the nearby bed, then turned back to Tweek.

"I'm sorry. We don't have a choice."

There were no more arguments as Kyle helped Tweek to his feet. Tweek shook and his knees buckled. Without Kyle, he couldn't even stand. He'd lost too much blood.

"You can do this," Kyle encouraged as he took a heaving step forward. There was such urgency in the way he spoke; it was in the way he moved, too. It was hard for Tweek to keep up.

Gritting his teeth, Tweek clutched to his friend. The ring of yellow light before them jarred up the stairs with each step. Tweek prepared to stumble up another wood plank, but Kyle froze. He pulled Tweek back, away from salvation. His wide, green eyes gawked ahead of them.

"Ky, what is it?" Tweek heaved. His blurry vision tried to focus, but Kyle already turned around.

"It's okay," Kyle chanted over and over as he ushered Tweek back down. "Just keep walking."

When they stumbled to the bottom, he heard something. Behind them, the stairs moaned beneath another pair of feet.

They weren't alone anymore.

"Kyle!" Tweek yelled as his heart slammed against his ribs.

"It's okay," Kyle repeated, although they both knew it was a lie.

Tweek's buckling knees gave in, and he and Kyle tumbled to the floor. The flashlight Tweek clutched flew from his grasp and cracked against concrete. Its guiding light flickered and died, dousing them in blackness.

The two scrambled away on their hands and knees, still clinging to one another. They crawled until a concrete wall stood in their way. They were backed into a corner. The sound of footprints stopped when the groaning of wood became a thump against concrete.

He was there, lingering only feet away from them.

Tweek threw his arms around Kyle and squeezed with what little strength he had.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Kyle assured. "It's okay."

Another light buzzed to life. It's blinding and harsh beam burned their eyes as they bathed in it. A Floodlight. Richard sat it between the rails on the staircase, then turned back to the cowering boys. He stuffed his hands into his pant pockets, then soundlessly stepped closer. Each move was careful, as if landmines were buried below his feet.

Nearby, Tweek's shovel sat among loose dirt and broken bricks. Kyle reached for it, but Richard wasn't fazed when the scrawny boy clutched it in his hands like a weapon.

"S-stay away!" he demanded as he swung the thing.

Richard only grinned, his un-patched eye sliding over them.

"How cute."

Kyle's skin crawled. He clutched the shovel's grip even tighter. He was anxious for Richard's first move, but the man never stepped closer.

"I was surprised to find you here, Kyle," Richard admitted. "I never would have guessed you were the one Tweek was protecting. At least not until you showed up at my shop. I pictured a girl."

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough."

By now, Kyle was in Tweek's lap, forming a barrier between his friend and the devil in the room. Tweek never let go. When he heard what his father spewed, though, his grip around Kyle tightened.

Kyle's reckless heart slowed its beating when he heard scratching behind him. Bone-tipped fingers scraped against the harsh wall as Craig crawled down it. Awkwardly bent limbs cracked and popped with each jarring movement. Blood poured between Kyle and Tweek when Craig's gaping maw spilled open. His bloody, sharp teeth were exposed in warning.

Richard would never touch the boys with Craig guarding them like a dog.

The tall man at their feet crouched quietly. The child's oozing head rotated like a satellite in search of sound. He prepared to strike as he had before, staking a claim on Richard's last eye. Without sound, though, Craig couldn't find it.

Kyle watched the man pick a brick off the ground, then chuck it across the room. It crashed into a wall with a pop and a bang. Craig's neck snapped towards it; a screech tore from his throat.

"What are you doing?" Kyle demanded, still clutching the shovel.

Richard replied by throwing another brick. When Craig heard the crash, he lunged in its direction, growling and spitting.

"Craig, he's trying to confuse you," Kyle said. "Remember what we talked about- you can't let fear get the better of you!"

As hard as he could, Richard chucked another brick at the furthest wall. Craig screamed in the direction of the bang. His desperate fingers dug into stone, and his plethora of arms wildly searched for the man. However, Craig would not leave their side.

Richard's face scrunched in frustration, but it wasn't long before it melted into another nasty grin.

Kyle screamed when a big hand gripped his ankle and yanked. He slid across the concrete, shovel clattering across the floor. Tweek panicked. He grabbed at Kyle's parka with incomplete hands, begging his father to stop. Craig jerked as he tried to make sense of all the booming noise.

Kyle kicked and rolled to get loose, but it was fruitless.

His body heaved up, and suddenly he was pinned between Richard's chest and the blade of a knife. When the pointed tip found his throat, all noise stopped. Kyle's thin legs knocked together and his wet eyes slammed closed.

Struggling would spell his death.

Tweek could only watch with blurred vision. Craig fell in his lap, teeth still bared and open for Richard's head. An odd clicking resonated from the boy's throat. He tipped his head from side to side, daring the man to make another move.

"Please, don't. Don't take him," Tweek's small voice pleaded. He leaned forward, trembling fingers reached for Kyle. "He has nothing to do with this- I'll do anything, please."

Hearing Tweek plead for his life only made Kyle's tears thicker.

The soles of his sneakers scuffed against the floor as Richard pulled him towards the stairs. Kyle's wild eyes locked with Tweek's, his only comfort.

Richard's breath huffed against the shell of Kyle's ear.

"Scream," he demanded.

Kyle's chest heaved rapidly. His eyes darted around the room. Scream? Did Richard want Craig to rip him apart?

The sharp tip of the blade dug into Kyle's tender skin. Tweek could do nothing but watch from the floor.

"Scream, or I'll make you."

A pained cry tore from his throat. Kyle did as he was told. He shrieked, and as loud as he could. Either Craig would come to his rescue, or someone outside might hear.

Craig's head snapped towards the sound, a shriek of his own spilling out of him.

Richard grabbed Kyle by the hair, and dragged him up the stairs. The rickety structure jarred when Craig ran headfirst into the railing, then shook with violence as he barreled towards them.

Kyle and Richard emerged from the closet under the staircase. Richard still fisted Kyle's hair, causing only more pained cries. Kyle couldn't keep up with where they were going. Darkness devoured them, and all else was hazy through his tears.

He could, however, hear Craig clawing at the hard wood behind them.

They stumbled up yet another staircase. By the time they reached the top Kyle's face was soaked and his knees were bruised. Kyle tried to resist as Richard threw open a door and pulled him through the frame. He scratched, bit, and hissed at the hands staking claim on his fate.

Richard fisted Kenny's parka in his hands and lifted the scrawny boy off the floor. Kyle never felt as weightless as he did when the man jerked, tossing him across the room like a broken toy.

He slammed into a wall and fell, struggling for breath, to the floor. The man stood motionless as he stared in the darkened doorway. Dawn broke through a cracked window. It's dim blue light crept into the room. Just enough to see an angry beast emerge from the hall.

Dozens of tiny fingers curled around the edges of the doorway and gripped the rotting frame. The wood groaned beneath their hatred. Craig drifted in. His limp body hung from his spine, where his spare limbs met. Red streams trickled down his legs and leaked off his toes. Cracked lips curled over his jagged, glass teeth.

Richard dared not make a sound. Not a move. He knew much better after losing his left eye.

When Kyle regained his breath, he coughed. Craig's neck popped towards the noise, and his hands abandoned the doorframe to bring him across the room. Richard backed away, as to avoid contact with the spirit's straying limbs.

Kyle rolled on the carpet, hacking and gasping. Craig's hands ran worriedly over the other boy. Once he was assured Kyle was breathing, his growling returned. Infuriated hands tipped over dressers and ran over the walls in search of Kyle's attacker.

Footsteps banged floorboards as Richard made a break for the hall. Craig's distorted form barreled towards him, but the door slammed hard in his mutilated face. Squealing resonated through the walls as Craig scratched at the wood. His bone-tipped fingers left deep scratches, but the door wouldn't give.

Kyle rolled onto his knees and held his throat.

It was a trick. Richard used Kyle as bait to lure Craig away from Tweek.

Kyle felt vibrations through his knees. A bang. A scream. Heavy footsteps. His mouth dried out when the back door slammed. It was so violent the whole house shook. He stumbled to his feet, and then to the window. His head span, but below he saw figures through the falling snow.

One dragged the other across the snow-plagued yard, towards the tree line. Towards the pond.

The room whirled around Kyle as he scoured for direction. All he found, though, was Craig. The boy that was once ramming his head into the door stood oddly still. He faced the wood like a child in a corner, then his head slowly turned towards Kyle.

"What?" Kyle sputtered. "What is it?"

Craig's nose twitched as he took in a big whiff of air. With brows furrowing, Kyle mimicked the movement. Nothing came to him besides the smell of mildew and old wood.

Craig abandoned the door and crawled towards the window. He felt around the wall for it, then slammed his palms into the glass.

"Craig! Move!"

Startled, Craig spun around. Kyle charged towards him with a metal chair clutched in his fists. Craig ducked, and Kyle sent the metal crashing through the window. Glass and wood alike shattered and rained down on the snow-covered ground below.

"He took Tweek- he took him towards the pond. Go!"

Craig growled at first, as if he didn't want to leave Kyle behind.

"I'll be okay! Go!" Kyle insisted as he pushed Craig towards the jagged hole. "Go help him!"

Craig crawled out the gaping hole like a spider, slid down the wall, and then disappeared, screaming into the night.

Kyle's knees knocked together as he stared out the gaping hole in the wall. His blood pumped hard through his tightening veins. Craig was free. Free to hunt down Richard like an animal and tear him apart. He would save Tweek.

That left another problem, though.

Tweek was hardly alive. Even with Craig's help, the boy would freeze to death before the police would find him. Kyle could practically see him shivering to death in the snow. The freezing water from the pond would take away any chance Tweek had.

No matter what, Tweek would not survive if Kyle didn't get out of that room. He ran to the shattered window and peered down. There was a small ledge right below it. If he was careful, he'd be able to shimmy to the roof. He could get down from there.

He didn't have much time to rethink his strategy. He moved one leg out of the gaping hole, careful not to get snagged on any lingering glass shards, and then the other.

"Oh, crap," he groaned as his wobbling legs tried to balance on the small ledge. His upper half was still inside. He clutched to the wood of the windowsill, unwittingly clutching to a few pieces of stray glass as he did so. Little known to Kyle, snow wasn't the only thing under his sneakers. He leaned out of the window and reached towards the roof, but never touched it. Kyle's foot landed on a thick patch of ice, and a scream pierced through the night.

He dropped to the bottom.

His cry halted when he landed on the cement stoop with a thud and a crack. His watering eyes rolled back and his spine quaked. Intense and searing pain racked through his breathless body.

Slowly, the buzzing in the back of his skull numbed. He blinked the water out of his eyes, and finally drank in a cold breath of air.

"God. Oh, god," he muttered through sharp inhales. It fucking hurt, but he was at the bottom. That's all that mattered. He could still do it.

His hands sank into slush and broken glass while he pushed himself up. He never made it off the ground. Instead, he let out a pitiful sound of agony before tumbling back into the frigid blanket of snow.

"What?-" he whimpered.

He couldn't feel his toes, and his foot didn't move when he tried to curl them. It was only then he realized his right leg was awkwardly bent.

It was broken.

"S-shit!" he screamed as he clutched at his useless limb. "Fuck! No!"

He thrashed as he tried to drag himself through the blistering cold, but he couldn't get far with his elbows alone. His body sank helplessly into the snow.

"I should have known better," he growled through chattering teeth. "We... We never had a chance. Never!"

Puffy white flakes fluttered down around him. Kenny's coat protected Kyle's body from their chill, but they dusted over him. Much longer, and they'd bury him alive.

Like Craig.

He let his heavy eyes fall closed and didn't fight the white blanket accumulating on his back.

"The only reason I even made it this far was because of dumb luck," he whispered through clenched teeth. "Clyde telling me about Richard, finding Tweek in the basement. I didn't do anything to get here on my own. I didn't even understand my visions. I'm useless... useless."

His red mop shifted as he buried his face in the fur trim of Kenny's hood. There was warmth there,

no matter how little. Through the thick layer of cloth came an odd smell. It was sharp like peppermint, but metallic like blood. He rolled slightly as his tired eyes cracked open. He smelled other things, too. Burning rubber and oil filled his lungs when he breathed in.

Color rested beside him in the snow. He squinted through the dim blue light that surrounded him. Blue. He saw blue, red, and brown splotches. They rolled around inside his eyes until he realized he was looking at a human form.

Another person lay face-down in the snow beside him.

"Stan?" He whimpered pitifully.

The person didn't speak, didn't move, as they lay dead in the quiet. Kyle reached out to grab a hold of the glove covered hand beside him. The red mitten was warm. So much warmer than Kyle. He squeezed it between his fingers. It squeezed back.

"Why are you still here?" Kyle asked, his voice small. "I... I failed. You were wrong about me."

The limp body beside him said nothing.

"I never helped anyone. Not even with these stupid... powers. It's not a gift, Stan. You were wrong. I was wrong. It's a curse, it always was."

"I don't think it's a curse," the chilly breeze whispered as it whistled by them. Somehow, the tone didn't fit. Kyle's words were listless and dead. The wind spoke differently, as if cut from a different conversation.

Kyle smiled softly through his tears.

"You always knew what to say," Kyle said, "but I don't think anything can fix it this time. I just... I want to be where you are."

Kyle's shivering hand squeezed Stan's tighter. The warmth in the red mittens was the only thing that made him feel alive.

"I want to be where Craig is- where... where Tweek's going. I don't want to be left behind."

Those words burned his throat in a way nothing ever had before. Despite his damning confession, Stan was silent. As silent as he'd always been.

"It's like some angry god had this planned from the beginning. I couldn't save Tweek; Just like I couldn't save you. I'm powerless."

A short, black veil of hair shifted. White freckles of snow fell from his hat as Stan raised his head to face his friend.

The depression in the snow where Stan laid was not sullied with blood as everything Craig touched was. In fact, there was no blood at all. No mangled skin or broken jaw. No gory mess that the impact of the train left behind. The face that smiled up at him through the fluttering snowflakes was just as untouched as it was the last time the spoke.

"Stan," Kyle heaved breathlessly. "You're... you're okay?"

Somehow, he was no longer trapped in the moment his drunken head broke through a windshield. The agony that should have chained him to a gory fate was severed.

Stan accomplished something they had only dreamt about. Something they feared had been impossible.

He moved on.

The spirit's worn eyes lowered, and then closed.

"I don't think it's a curse," the wind carried Stan's words, although he didn't speak them. Words that came from a different conversation, but were more needed now than they were when they were spoken. "It sounds more like a gift to me."

Kyle tried to speak, but his throat clogged with whimpers. Stan squeezed his hand, then the spirit's blue eyes shifted towards the treeline. Kyle's watery gaze slipped towards it as well.

The Sky was no longer black. Dark colors of blue and purple bled onto its canvas. The trees seemed impossibly tall, their black leaves scraping mountain tops. It was beautiful, though the picturesque image was stained with a form that stood among the trees.

In the brush where Richard dragged Tweek away, there stood a rabbit.

It wore a nice blue suit, and a pair of spectacles set upon its twitching nose. Kyle saw this creature only once before. It was in the vision of Tweek that led him there. What exactly the monstrosity was, Kyle couldn't be sure. All he knew was that Tweek was terrified of it.

It's long, fuzzy ears rotated like satellite dishes. It's large, black eyes bulged toward Stan and Kyle. Its small mouth stretched into a toothy, human grin, and then it followed Richard's path into the woods.

"Stan... what is that?" Kyle asked.

"Hopelessness," the wind whispered. "If you belong to it, it takes you. It holds you under 'til nothing's left."

"Why is it here?"

"To take them. Both of them. You were the only thing left in its way."

Never, Never

Tweek's heels dragged through a cold, white blanket. Thorns and nettles poked through his sweatpants and into his flesh, but their sting was nothing compared to the numbing snow. He'd never felt such a thing. It started in his feet and legs, but quickly sucked the life out of the rest of him.

He had no strength to fight. He could only chatter his teeth as his limp body dragged across the forest like a doll. It was a funny thing, though, that he no longer felt pain. Perhaps the cold turned his limbs into useless, dead husks.

He could still hear, however. It faded in and out like a bad station, but it was there. His father's voice. It was low and gravelly, and it said something about Kyle.

Tweek's heart jerked painfully.

"Where?" he managed to groan through chattering teeth. "Where is he?"

Tweek's pants snagged on a fallen log. His father squeezed him around his ribs and gave a mighty yank. His sweats tore open. The branch took a chunk of Tweek's bloody flesh along with it. His limbs were so numbed he didn't notice.

"Where is Kyle?" Tweek demanded, louder that time.

His father glowered at him as he crushed Tweek's ribs between his arms.

"Locked up, for now," was Richard's reply. "With that little slut of yours."

Tweek growled at his father's disgusting choice of words.

His legs were dead weight, but with gritted teeth he threw one over the other. With the twist of the spine, he rolled out of Richard's deadly embrace and fell into the snow at the man's feet. His father cursed in frustration while Tweek tried to will his unfeeling limbs to lift him upright.

"I'm fucking telling you, the more you struggle the harder this is going to be for the both of us!" Richard shouted.

The sole of his boot rammed into Tweek's back. The force was so intense Tweek feared it burst his ribcage open. Pained gasps tore through his throat as the heel of the boot twisted into his spine.

"I... want..." Tweek muttered between gasps, "I want to see them."

"What?" Richard hissed.

"Kyle... Craig."

Richard's angry hands ripped him up from the ground. Amongst his father's breathless panting, Tweek heard the rippling of nearby water.

"Oh, my boy," his father said. He said as if the last two months hadn't happened, and they were sitting parallel at the dinner table. "We all want for things. That doesn't mean they're what's best for us..."

The man's voice dropped and a sneer found his lips.

"And it surely doesn't mean we're going to get them."

Tweek was too incoherent from blood loss to keep up with so many words. He just blinked hard to clear his hazy vision.

Richard squinted down with disgust.

"Oh, son, what a disappointment your dad turned out to be. I never wanted it to come to this, honestly... I've lost control," the man stopped to belt out a laugh. Tweek was squeezed so hard he could barely breathe. "All of this was to protect you! Then that little bitch shows up, then he- he's protecting you from me? No, I hope you can understand, and forgive me someday. I'm the only one who can save you.

"It's time we say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Tweek whimpered.

The violent disturbance of water filled his ears, and then his heels sank into frigid liquid. It sloshed around his legs until it was up to his knocking knees. Already, it devoured what little warmth was left in him.

His father's breath was rapid, but focused. He squeezed his limp son from behind. Tweek's back pressed up against Richard's chest to keep the boy above the surface.

Soon, Tweek's head would be filling with water. His lungs would be breached, his body overwhelmed with it. Tweek would be killed, and there was nothing he could do but let it happen.

And by his own father.

"I'm sorry..." Richard said. His voice became soft, like it was when Tweek was young and being lulled to sleep. It ghosted over the shell of Tweek's ear. "I have to protect you. S-set you free."

With every breath Tweek exhaled a white cloud of mist wafted from his lips. He was so chilled to the bone he didn't feel cold anymore. In fact, he may have even felt warm, especially with the comfort that came from his father's tone.

If Richard killed him, it would be the kindest mercy the man ever gave.

"What will happen to you?" Tweek asked in a whisper, then immediately hated himself for caring.

"Don't worry, I'll be close behind."

Tweek's heart shifted uncomfortably, and he again felt the urge to cry. Not for his own life, but for his father's.

His self-hate crashed back upon him.

How could he feel remorse for the man who slaughtered his dearest friend? This was the same man who beat him in the basement; the same man who tried to make Tweek... do things.

He was also the man who packed butter and jelly sandwiches for his lunches and taught him how to ride a bike.

Were those things real, or was the father Tweek loved just as made up as everything else turned out to be? Whatever the answer, despite Tweek's anger, there was still love for the man.

The tears on his cheeks felt frozen to his stiff face. He never felt so ashamed, but no more bitter liquid would come.

The arms that kept him on his feet released him, and his limp body crashed into the icy waters.

It felt like he'd been shoved into a freezer.

He could move and weakly jerk about, but he never touched anything. He could open his eyes, but all he saw was a brownish black gradient of an abyss.

He floated in a void. Every part of him was desperate for warmth as he struggled to breathe in. As he kicked and thrashed with what little strength he had, he heard familiar sounds. It was a muddy and distorted sloshing.

Somehow, he felt like he'd been there before.

Panic set in when he finally gasped, only to be met with a throat full of ice cold water. He moved closer to the bright brown beams of color above him. Despite this, he knew he wouldn't make it to the surface conscious.

When he had that terrible revelation a large pair of hands broke through the shining rays of ripples. His heart leapt out of his chest with hope that Richard changed his mind.

They grabbed his wrists. He expected to be heaved up out of the dark pit, but his rejoicing gave way into terror. Those hands tightly wound themselves around his throat, and then pressed him deeper into the water.

He was so close to the surface. He could see distorted colors dancing in the chaos of the water.

He gasped in a painful mouthful of the fluid. His vision blurred, and his lungs burned like hot iron against his insides.

This was it. He was going to die. He was going to die and feel this horrible, unfathomable pain for the rest of eternity.

He decided this wouldn't happen. Even if he couldn't control his death, he would control how he felt in his last seconds. It was a rebellious act, much like pillow fighting with Craig and Kyle.

Craig and Kyle.

As his vision began to fade, a faint smile adorned his bluing face.

...

Little known to either Tweek or the man above him, they were not alone.

Merely feet away a boy stood in the thicket of the woods. He could not see, but he tipped his head side to side as he listened.

The whistling wind was sullied with loud sloshes. Among these sounds, there was another. Heavy, rapid breathing interrupted the stillness of the waterfront. The breath was familiar and sharp. It pierced through Craig and left him trembling.

Water splashed against the quickly freezing shore. When the surface broke, someone gasped desperately for a breath. Through the relentless waves of blistering air, Craig felt Tweek's warmth fading.

Craig's terrified cries echoed through the dense trees.

"No!" the chorus shouted from the bottom of Craig's throat.

He charged into the water. His small hands clutched for the back of Richard's collar. When he found it, his heels dug into the pond's muddy floor. He tried to pull the man off Tweek. Richard was so absorbed in the throat he was crushing he hardly noticed.

"Don't take him from me!" the child wailed as he twisted the cloth in his fists and jerked harder. Richard gagged as the fabric tightened around his throat.

The man jerked around. The point of his elbow slammed into the side of Craig's head. The force of the blow threw him, and he tumbled into the snow.

Craig jerked on trembling arms as he tried to push himself back up. His ears rang so loud it left him dazed and useless. He fell back onto his side. Without his hearing, he was as helpless against Richard as he'd ever been.

He was no match for the monster of a man on his own, but he wasn't alone anymore.

A groan tore from Richard's throat as a searing pain wracked through his body. Something pierced his flesh and embedded in the side of his neck. Richard's hands unwound from Tweek's throat as he stood in the water. The blade ripped out of him. Blood poured down his shoulder, and he turned with wide eyes to face the creature who struck him.

What he came to face with, though, was far from what he expected. Rather than caverns of blood and razor sharp teeth, he was met with a pair of wild green eyes. The Broflovski's boy sat in the edge of the water. In his shuddering fist was a knife; one that was once pressed against Kyle's throat. Blood dripped down its blade and onto the boy's pale hands.

There were no sounds. Only the dripping of water from the man's soaked clothes.

Richard reached for Kyle, but stumbled in the pond's bitter liquid and fell to his knees. The man pressed his palm against the gaping wound. Blood spurted from between his fingers and poured into the water. No matter how hard he pressed, he couldn't keep the red from seeping out his veins.

"Little... bitch," Richard groaned.

Kyle gaped, wide eyed, at what he'd done. His head swirled with thoughts of Tweek, but he couldn't tear his eyes off of the crumbling man and his river of blood.

The painful ringing faded from Craig's ears, and pair of his spare arms wrapped around his middle. Four others pushed him off the freezing ground and placed him on his feet. His jaw cracked as he let out a mournful cry in search of Tweek's voice.

He ran past an immobilized Kyle and a choking Richard. The soles of his feet slapped against the soggy shore, and then water splashed against the boy's hips. Soft waves beat against Tweek's body. They gently cradled him in the shallows of the pond, where Craig's shaking fingertips brushed against his hair.

A cry bubbled out of Craig's throat when he grabbed Tweek by his shoulder. With the other children lending their limbs, he pulled his friend from the muddy water and laid him ashore.

There was still warmth inside, no matter how faint. He ran his palms over Tweek's face, and then cooed gently at its familiar bumps and hills. Craig tilted his head when his affectionate greeting

wasn't returned.

Craig pulled at his friend's soaked shirt sleeve. He clutched Tweek's wrist and pressed the mutilated palm of it against his face. With the help of Craig's own fingers, Tweek's thumb wiped away the blood from his eyes.

It wouldn't caress him on its own.

He ran his hands from Tweek's purple throat to his ribcage. He felt every long bone, but not the strong and steady rhythm of their rise and fall.

Craig's ribs quaked with teary hiccups. His bones squeezed Tweek's hand against him as he pressed his forehead into his friend's chest.

"*We're okay now*," the children helped Craig whisper.

Craig's tiny fingers clutched onto the front of Tweek's shirt. Fresh blood overflowed from where he was most afraid of being touched. It left grisly streams of red slathered across his legs and dirty white shirt. It spilled all over Tweek, too. He didn't care. He just stayed there, rocking back and forth while rubbing Tweek's face.

"*We're okay. We're fine. Nobody can hurt you now.*"

Something changed inside the boy. Where Tweek's warmth once resided in Craig's heart went cold, and his glass-lined jaws clenched together with uncontrollable rage.

Behind him, beyond the statue of fear Kyle became, Richard gagged around the blood pooling in his throat. Never had Craig and the other children encountered the man as subdued and defenseless as he was then.

"*Look how helpless, the poor thing. He is going to join us in death soon*," the calmest child noted with Craig's lips.

"*Yes*," said the angriest. "*The rabbit will devour him.*"

A mischievous giggle bubbled out of Craig's throat, but it wasn't his.

"*I can think of a fate more fitting*," the calmest chimed. "*We can pull him to the bottom, like he did to us.*"

"*No!*" pleaded the youngest through slurred words and fear. "*Let the rabbit take him! I don't want to go back down!*"

The shared face twisted red with sorrow as the youngest wept miserably. Craig cradled his head in his hands. Regaining control was never hard before, but now Craig could barely speak out amongst the other children.

"*Shut up! We won't go*," a voice, Craig's voice, said. The red water seeped from the edges of his lips and dribbled down his chin. With every forced word, the glass cut into him. "*How could you say that?!*" the angriest barked from behind his hands. "*He killed Tweek, you should want to hurt him!*"

"No! I want to be a good thing!" Craig argued. "*Tweek's good thing!*" "Tweek's here, isn't he?" "The dog never should have chosen you to be the host!"

A pair of Craig's spare arms left his side to take a fistful of Richard's hair. The man tried to push it away, but he couldn't stop them from forcing his head under the water.

"He will suffer!" the children demanded.

Kyle snapped out of his trance with a scream. He hadn't noticed Craig's struggle until the boy's arms slammed Richard's head down. Only then did he see how much blood coated his fingers. He gasped, then chucked the filthy knife in the pond. As far away from him as he could.

He turned and crawled towards Tweek and his raging little creature. Craig still sat on Tweek's hips when Kyle dragged his body beside them.

Kyle put his hand to Tweek's throat in search of warmth, or, better yet, a pulse. Richard's blood smeared off Kyle's hands and onto Tweek's face.

Craig dug his bones into one of the rogue arms. He scratched desperately where it connected with his spine, but he couldn't break away from it.

Only two children remained loyal to Craig. Their hands clawed and scratched at Craig's back in a vain attempt to rip the disobeying limbs from his spine. There was nothing they could do, though, when the remaining souls sided with the angriest child.

A terrified yowl spilled from Craig's lips as he was torn away. All but four of his spare arms skittered toward Richard. They had every intention of going to the bottom with him. Craig's terrified hands gripped onto Tweek's pant leg and he let out a pleading sound. This time, however, Tweek couldn't protect him.

"Craig!" Kyle screamed as he reached for the boy's outstretched hand, but Craig was pulled out of reach.

Kyle's head span in circles. Every fiber of his being screamed for him to run to Craig, but Tweek was still breathless in his arms.

"Stop!" Craig begged as he kicked at his vicious arms. *"I don't want to go down there!"*

Craig had a fighting chance. "Yo ū 'r' ē" hŭr tĭn g' m' ē d' ! "x

All Tweek had was Kyle.

Tears spilled from green eyes as he slammed his mouth against Tweek's. He forced a heavy breath down his friend's throat, then slammed his hands against Tweek's chest. His arms shook against his will, but he still forced Tweek's ribs to move under the weight of them.

"Please, stop!" Craig begged. He sank his fingers into the mud to try and resist, but he lost all control of the others. His hands raked through the muck as they dragged him into the pond. He couldn't separate from their rage, and he couldn't subdue their bloodlust.

Richard was beside him, ensnared in the children's vengeful limbs. The boy stared with a knot in his throat. Richard glared up at him with his last, angry eye. The killer who was once so organized and self-assured had fallen into emotional pieces. Water was up to his bleeding neck. Small hands clutched at his face. The arms they were attached to squeezed so tightly his bones popped in the weight of their misery.

"You're the devil," the man hissed as blood filled the cracks of his teeth. "Putrid, selfish whore."

He couldn't blame the others for wanting to destroy this man. Craig's lips twitched into a tortured smile, though he hadn't meant for it to. The hands that gripped Richard tightened around his wounded throat until it popped and the man was gagging.

"*Oh,*" the children's many voices uttered from Craig's lips. His head tipped to the side, into the water. "*You poor, pretty thing.*"

Richard's eye gaped as they were ripped from the surface and dragged along the muddy bottom. Richard's big hands escaped from the tendrils of writhing flesh and sank into Craig's sides. They dug through his shirt and into his flesh, as if to send some vile message to the boy.

It hurt.

Craig tried to scream. When only water filled his mouth, he remembered Tweek wouldn't be coming to his rescue. For the first time in years, he was alone.

The quivering mass of limbs settled like a stone on the pond's floor. The painful grip on his hips loosened with Richard's watery death. The children released the body. Craig felt it float up and away from them, towards the surface of the pond. The empty place Richard's body left was filled with something else.

It began as a black blob. The children crushed it in their hands as it struggled to take form.

Their laughter echoed through the emptiness of the pond, but Craig's chest tightened. The small black blob split through their fingers and settled in the mud around them. Mischievous giggles filled Craig's skull as their hands raked through the floor in search of the putrid thing they were playing with.

The others wanted to torture the man as they had been. They desired only to rip his body away from him and have their way with his filthy soul. To violate him and steal his existence as he had done to them.

Craig only wanted his freedom.

His hands frantically searched the rocky bottom for something, anything, that could sever the parasites in his spine. Still, not all the children had abandoned him. A gentle hand took a hold of his wrist, and another placed a gift in his palm. It was hard plastic, but the tip was a sturdy, sharpened metal.

Those same kind hands wrapped tightly around the fleshy base of a hostile arm. Craig drew back the knife, Kyle's knife, and jammed it into the joint that connected him and the angry limb.

The laughter transformed into an agonized wail. He sawed at the flesh and tendons until his helping hands ripped bone out of his spine. Flesh tore and vessels burst as the flailing limb was severed. He cried as they repeated this gory mutilation of their souls. Not because of the mind numbing pain. Because, one by one, he was abandoning the others.

There was no other way, the kind ones reminded him. If he was attached to them, he'd be attached to Richard, too.

A hand burst of the mud, but it wasn't small and pale like the children's. It was a dark silhouette that cut through their arms and wound its fingers around Craig's ankle. The mere touch of its flesh burned into him like hot iron. The children took it by the wrist, but another surged out of the ground and pierced into his thigh like knives.

He was in the basement again.

The ropes cut into his wrists. The camera clicked with its dreaded shutter. The salt was on his tongue.

His chest filled with the uncomfortably familiar need for escape.

He jerked his ankle free and slammed his heel into the monster below him. It clashed hard against a skull. This only enraged the creature.

Water jetted past Craig as he was smashed against the pond's rocky bottom. Those big hands grabbed him by the front of the shirt. The boy's first instinct was to curl up in the face of the monster's power and beg to be forgiven.

Forgiven for what, though? Nothing! No! *That's not the way to go!* Craig drew back his arm and drove the sharp end of Kyle's knife into Richard's head. The beast let out a muffled cry. It coiled back as it clutched to its face. Craig used this moment to sever what ties he had left to the others, who were still screeching for their retribution.

He braced himself against the pond floor. A cloud of dirt wafted around him when he pushed off, aiming for the surface. The gory man below him, however, was not as desperate to be separated.

A black hand scraped his toes as the man clawed after him. Before Richard could rip into Craig, his fingers tensed. Small, yet merciless limbs captured the shadow of a spirit. Their fingernails scraped into his flesh, and he let out a wail as they reeled him back to the bottom.

They would never leave the nightmare he created for them. Now, neither could he.

...

When Craig broke through the surface, he gasped jealously for air he couldn't breathe. He struggled to stay afloat, and water splashed loudly in his panic. Through the noise, he couldn't hear where the waves broke on the shore.

He cried out, and by some miracle, someone replied. It was a far away and muffled scream, but he knew it was calling his name. Thoughts of Tweek swarmed Craig's frantic mind, so he paddled aimlessly towards the call.

"Craig!"

He heard it again and again, louder each time. He paddled until his knees scraped against the shallows of the pond, where a pair of arms scooped him out of the water. He was held against a heaving chest, and he took in a strong whiff of the person holding him.

It wasn't Tweek's smell; earthy and dark. Rather, he inhaled the fruity scent of Kyle's shampoo. The boy pulled his head away from Kyle's chest. The faint sound of distant sirens filled the air, along with Kyle's quiet whimpering.

There was nothing else.

"Yes, yes," Kyle said through chattering teeth. "He's okay, I think."

Kyle let out a groan when he moved. Maneuvering through the woods on his broken leg, only a branch as a crutch, put him in unbearable pain. Still, he dragged Craig from the shore, and laid him

down in the soft snow.

The boy didn't cry when Kyle's thumb rubbed weakly at his eyelids. Somehow, the useless flaps of flesh had matted shut over his eye sockets. The side of a broken nail scraped along the seam and broke away the scabs.

The bruised lids split apart, and for the first time in a long time, Craig saw something other than darkness. He reeled as blurry masses of bright color assaulted him, and the thumb moved to scrape at his other matted eye.

He stared at the person laying on their back beside him. The one the thumb was attached to. This wasn't Kyle. He heard his voice echoing behind them as he screamed at the sirens.

The man beside him was a stranger. He was large, larger than Richard, and his face was colored with open wounds and smudges of drying crimson. Despite his ghostly appearance, blood pumped through his veins. This was a living man.

Craig would have been afraid if not for the look on his face. His thin, cracked lips quirked into the smallest smile. His eyes were tired and sickly, but they wrinkled with joy as Craig's left eye peeled open and adjusted to the light.

The same thumb that freed his eyes weakly raised to caress Craig's cheek. The boy stared, dumbfounded at the familiar feeling.

With cautious movements, Craig's bone tipped fingers reached out to return the affectionate gesture. He ran his palms over the pale face. Every bump and hill of the stranger's features was familiar, and he realized this man was no stranger at all.

Blue, Craig thought as tears, real tears, ran down his face.

Tweek's eyes are blue.

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